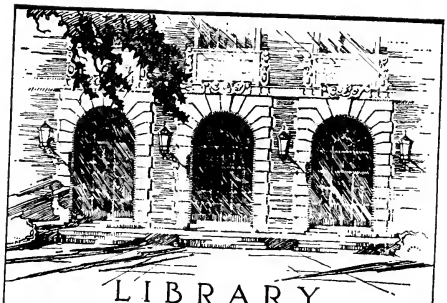

SCHEHERAZADE:

A London Night's Entertainment.

VOL. III.

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BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF

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CHAPTER I.

Chloris White was one of those utterly corrupt, abandoned, and dangerous women in whom certain noble and lovable qualities flourish with a rank and prolific luxuriance impossible in colder and better balanced natures. She had liked George Lauriston from the first, with the impulsive yet altogether undiscriminating liking of a woman clever enough, while knowing the worst side of men thoroughly, to understand that there is a better, and to work upon that also when it suited her purpose. When chance threw the young officer in her daughter's way, she spared no pains both by her own investigations

and those of Rahas, in whom she found an agent ready to her hand—subtle, secretive, and not above bribes—to find out whether Lauriston as a son-in-law would satisfy her affection and her ambition, for Nouna. Every report proved satisfactory ; there was nothing against him but his poverty ; and as Chloris White, at three-and-thirty still in the height of her vogue, helped herself with both hands to the savings of centuries and revelled in the spoils of city and country, there was no reason to make that an insuperable obstacle. For this half-bred Indian woman was born ambitious, and was determined that in her child should be fulfilled such aspirations as she had failed to realise in her own person.

The illegitimate daughter of an Indian Maharanee and an English government official, Lakshmi—for that was Chloris White's real name — had been born with the germs of marvellous beauty and ungovernable passions, both of which developed until at fifteen, when she became, by various artful ruses, the wife of a deeply-enamoured young officer, who was even at the time ashamed enough of his

marriage to wed the little witch under an assumed name—she was the most fascinating little fury in the Presidency. Though her husband had well-founded suspicions of her infidelity, she was clever enough to prevent his obtaining proofs of it, and at last, despairing of getting free in a more legal manner of this burden upon his life, a half-savage wife, ignorant, vicious, and violent, he left her when his regiment returned to England, leaving such provision as he, then a poor lieutenant, could afford for her and his child, a girl only a few weeks old, whose paternity he affected to doubt. Four years passed, during which he heard no more of either of them. The poor lieutenant became, by unexpected deaths, heir to a title; he wanted to marry. Detectives, set to work both in England and in India, could find no trace either of mother or child. Finally, the husband decided that they must have gone down in the whirlpool, as such a woman would be most likely to do. He risked the venture and married. For years more no rumour of the lost wife troubled him, until,

when he was Viscount Florencecourt, Colonel of his regiment, and father of two boys for whom he would have died, a horrible phantom rose, conjured up by a letter from the solicitors Messrs. Smith and Angelo, who made known to him that his wife, Lady Florencecourt, had arrived in England. He tried silence, denial ; but the wild Lakshmi had grown into a remarkably capable woman, and her lawyers were furnished with ample proofs that the lady now leading a notorious life in London and the little dare-devil imp whom the young lieutenant married seventeen years ago, were one and the same person. She had ferreted him out, hunted him down.

Lord Florencecourt submitted ; he would consent to anything, if she would only hold her peace. At first Lakshmi was merciful, contenting herself with a warning that his daughter had claims upon him to which he would have to give ear to by and by. Then, having heard of Lady Florencecourt's pearls, Lakshmi demanded them for a wedding gift to his daughter. It was at this point that he saw Nouna by accident in the barrack-yard

at Hounslow, and the fact was sprung upon him that this daughter of whom he was in vague dread was already the wife of his favourite officer. The next blows followed quickly: he must allow a thousand a year towards the support of the young couple, must cause his "exclusive" sister to call upon them, must induce Lady Florencecourt to receive them. The wretched man had fulfilled every command, unable to console himself even with the reflection that these troubles were undeserved. At last, fearing that Lady Florencecourt's rudeness to Nouna, whom she suspected of being his daughter, would bring down upon them the last, worst punishment, he had to confess the whole story, and purchase her civility to young Mrs. Lauriston at the price of such a course of lectures, curtain and otherwise, as the mind of man recoils from considering.

For her husband Lakshmi had no mercy. He had treated her badly, the first and the last man who had ever had a chance of doing so, and the power she now held over him she used with the cruelty of a nature in its depths

half savage still. But for this young fellow, who had treated her child with quixotic honour and delicacy which she, of all women, knew how to appreciate, she felt, when the awful discovery of her identity stunned him into momentary idiotcy in her presence, an impulse of pity and tenderness almost as strong as any she had ever felt for the daughter whom Chloris with all her faults adored. Lauriston's good looks also, his muscular figure and healthy, sun-browned face, added considerably in her sensual eyes to the attraction his chivalrous character gave him. As he still leant back against the wooden support of the verandah, staring not at her but over her head in a struggle to get back his wits and realise the nature of the blow which had stunned him, Chloris White came forward and laid her hands winningly upon his shoulders with a pretty maternal air of compassion, which was the sincere expression of a kindly impulse tempered by an ever-present professional sense of the picturesque and moving. Her touch, the glance down at her face which it compelled him to give,

brought remembrance back in a flood, and filled him with loathing so overwhelming that he affected to stagger back inadvertently from the inadequate support on which he was leaning. Respect for women dies hard in men of decent lives, and George would not have had even this abandoned woman know the horror and disgust she excited in him. She had kept her child pure, he must remember that; but all the stories he had heard of her unequalled rapacity and depravity rushed into his mind with the lightning rapidity of thought in moments of intense excitement, and gained a horribly fascinating force of likelihood as, by the light of all he knew about her, he examined the face of Lord Florencecourt's wife.

Chloris White was still at thirty-three a woman of surprising beauty, of small, lithe, youthful figure, and face far surpassing her daughter's in perfection of feature. But the daring process of changing her hair from raven black to a subdued golden tint had rendered necessary a change of complexion which gave a weird prominence to her long,

black-fringed eyes, and helped to stamp the countenance with the unmistakable impress of evil. There was in her beauty none of the essential coldness of the English types, whose worst representatives lure for the most part at the outset by an appearance of straightforward innocence in the gaze of confiding blue or grey eyes. She was a glowing spark from the forge of Evil, burning, searing, daringly brilliant and unmistakable, whose allurement appealed directly to the viler side of men ; her attractions were the poisonous charms of stagnant waters and forest swamps, of venomous reptiles that hang or creep in sinuous curves where vegetation is rankest, where no breeze penetrates to disperse the fumes of damp and decay : her beauty was the beauty of corruption.

George Lauriston was not the man to remain long the prey of vain imaginings ; almost as soon as he recovered full use of his mind after the first stunning shock, he was entirely himself again, understanding that a contest between them was inevitable, and deciding as rapidly what were to be his chief weapons.

His first impulse had been to avoid a discussion, by withdrawing at once without an explanation, resigning his commission, and emigrating with Nouna to the uttermost parts of the earth. But close upon this idea had followed the certainty that this spoilt creature, baffled in her ambition for her child, would use the means of compensating herself offered by her hold over the Colonel, and by proclaiming and proving herself to be the real Lady Florencecourt, bring ruin to the family. Chloris also prepared herself for a struggle. She knew that the cynical philosophy which would quietly accept a daughter and a fortune from hands such as hers, was not to be found in company with the virtues for which she had chosen her son-in-law.

Therefore, with head bent like a penitent Magdalen, so meek that the harshest could not spurn her, she drew back as if in shame, and addressed him in a low murmuring voice of an indescribably vibrating quality, sweet, deep-toned, and penetrating as the sound-waves of an organ through quiet aisles. The voice, like the face, shook George with an

unspeakable horror. For in every glance, in every tone, he saw a sickening, awful likeness to the young wife he worshipped, and in the power this depraved woman exercised over half the fools of the day, his unhealthily excited fancy saw a hideous burlesque of the undue dominion Nouna had already got over him. He listened without looking at her at first, until the irresistibly melting tones made it impossible to forbear meeting her eyes in the searching demand to know whether the face would belie the words.

"You will not let me touch you, the husband of my own child. I do not blame you. I can even say I am sorry you have come, since to meet me has given you pain. I am not proud for myself, I am only proud for my child—my children. While I kept myself apart from you for your happiness, my soul, all that is best and truest in me, was with you. You are my judge, my son, but remember that."

Even the highflown speech was like Nouna in her serious moods. George glanced at her. Her eyes, to which the rest of her face,

beautiful as it was, seemed in moments of excitement only a sort of unnoticed setting, were like liquid fire.

"I am no judge, madam," he said, "and I thank God for bringing me here to-day."

Her expression changed; evidently she had prepared herself for an outburst of anger, and was less able to cope with a masculine quietness.

"You are glad you came to-day?" she faltered, not knowing what this might portend, for her visitor gave no sign of working himself up to a good, warming height of indignation.

"Yes. You would have let me go on for months living like a skunk."

The Magdalen look gave place at once to a vindictive tightening of the lips and narrowing of the eyes.

"You are not satisfied with what I have done for you?"

"No, madam."

"Why, what would you have?"

"I would have had you let me know the truth. I deserved it."

"But you would have objected to my

daughter's having the fortune which made her happy."

"If you knew I should object, you had the less right to deceive me."

He was not going to prate about his honour to this creature; he did not even think she would understand him, but he was mistaken. Now that she saw what tone he was going to take she adjusted hers to meet him, and became cool and haughty.

"My daughter's nurse, Sundran, came to me to-day to tell me where to find the husband who deserted me when I was no more than a child; she thought, poor woman, I did not know. I gathered that her recognition did not surprise you."

"Well, madam."

"Will it satisfy you to have your wife acknowledged as the Honourable Nouna Kilmorna, only daughter of Lord Florencecourt?"

"No, madam. Nouna is my wife, that is enough for me. I only want you to understand that she must be content to live for a few years like a poor officer's wife, some

day she shall have as much rank and position as she could wish."

"Oh, that would be charming for you; but Nouna! Do you think she is the sort of girl to be happy by herself in stuffy lodgings while you are amusing yourself 'getting on'? Come, you know better. If she couldn't be contented like that during her honeymoon, do you think she could now?"

The bitterness of this thrust, to which experience had given a barbed point, made him wince.

"She is only a child," said he; "feeling my love about her day by day, she will learn to be happy in that, as you would have been if your husband had been all your heart wanted," he added, as a happy thought.

But Chloris White only laughed, having the coarse cynical honesty of her kind. "Do you really believe that?" she said. "Well, you are wrong. In my case, because no one man could ever have been to me all my heart wanted; in Nouna's case, because she is, disguise it what way you like, her mother's child. Give her jewels, new gowns, gaiety,

luxury, and you may hold what room there is in her heart for a man; shut her in two rooms, restrict her to one frock for each of the seasons, and you will see, if you don't know, just how much happiness your love is able to give her. I tell you she must have pleasure, pleasure, pleasure; and if you won't let her accept it openly, passing through your hands as a gift from you, I'll let her have it secretly through somebody else's."

A spirit of evil seemed to flash a hideous lightning across her handsome face as she uttered this threat. George was horror-struck.

"You don't mean what you say," he said, catching his breath. "You, who were noble enough to keep apart from your child for her sake! You would not destroy your own work now!"

"I would destroy anything when I'm worked up to it," she said coolly. "Listen, Mr. Lauriston. The world makes distinctions as to the ways in which money is made; but it makes none as to the way in which it is spent; that can and does confer nothing but honour. Well, that part of the business is all

I ask of you. As to the way I get it, why many a man of your trade might think himself blessed if he got his with so clear a conscience. There are no villages burned to give me a cocked hat, nor towns plundered that I may build a villa. My money's my own, to do what I like with, and I choose to give it to my children to make them a position in the world. Nobody knows where it comes from, and nobody needs know; and you can call it your wife's money, not yours, if you are so particular. But she must and shall have it. Money is not made by looking at it by me more than by anybody else. I've worked for a fortune to give my daughter, because I mean her to have the best of everything in this world. I'm ready even never to see her except by a trick, but I won't have my work foiled just at the last by any squeamish folly on your part; if you won't have wife and fortune together, you shall have neither, I swear."

"You don't seem to understand, madam, that your control over your daughter ceased when she became my wife."

"Did it?" retorted Chloris White, with scornful emphasis. "Well, you can entertain that opinion, if it comforts you, for a few days longer. But don't depend too much on your legal rights when you are dealing with a person who lives outside the law."

"I can trust your love for Nouna to conquer any impulse you might have to do her harm through me," said George, a bull-dog defiance rising in him and affecting the tone in which he uttered these sufficiently pacific words.

"You can trust me to keep her from having her life ruined by any man's pig-headedness," said Chloris, throwing herself into a long cane lounging chair with much spirit in voice and attitude. "Do you think I brought up Nouna virtuously to secure her happiness?" she asked mockingly. "No, I meant her to be happy in spite of it. I meant her to enjoy all the honours of the great world, and all the luxury of the other one; I meant her to become what she has become, a society pet, a society lion, by the very ways and manners which in me are Bohemian, shocking, impos-

sible. Oh! They are easily gulled, those feather-brained ladies of the 'best' society. However, it is 'the best,' and so I mean my daughter to keep there."

"You don't understand these people," said George, disgusted by her shameless cynicism, but resolved to go through with the contest, and to make the best terms he could. "She has made friends among them now, real friends. When they hear she has lost her fortune they will simply try to make up for the loss by inviting her more, making more fuss with her than ever."

Chloris White shook her head contemptuously.

"Poor gentility," she said, "that depends on the broken dainties cast to it by its betters—for betters in money are betters in everything—is worse off than the frank poverty that lives on offal. Now poverty in any shape is loathsome, and it shall not come near my daughter. Fortune with honour is the best possible thing, but fortune without honour is the next best, infinitely better in Nouna's case than any amount of love in garrets. You see

I am acting on principle. If you insist—and I see by your English bull-dog face you mean to insist (it is a trick of your country, and of no use with a woman) in refusing my daughter the fortune she is entitled to, I shall encourage the suit—the secret suit—of a lover who will be more compliant."

She took a cigarette-case from the table beside her, and striking a wax match on a tiny box that jingled among other objects from a *châtelaine* at her side, she lit a cigarette, and puffing a long spiral cloud into the air above her, watched it disperse and fade with much apparent interest.

To George she had become, in the course of the last few moments, no longer a beautiful, depraved human creature with one fair spot in her nature that had to be touched, but a slimy noisome thing to be shaken off as quickly as possible and avoided for ever. He looked at her steadily, so steadily indeed that she turned her head on one side, and shot at him an oblique glance, in preference to bearing the full brunt of a gaze of such mortifying disgust and contempt. Then, bowing to her very

coldly, he said he was afraid he had intruded upon her too long, and seeing a few steps off the open door by which he could pass through to the front of the house without re-entering the drawing-room, he was retreating towards it, when a voice in the hall struck upon the hearing both of him and of Chloris at the same time, causing her to start up from her lounging attitude with a bound of thirsty triumph, crushing all his cold armour of pride and laying bare in a moment the wounded passionate heart it had hidden.

He sprang forward, panting, feverish, imploring, like a weak boy at her mercy, held her wrists, looked down into her face with eyes that let light into the recesses of passion within him.

"For God's sake spare her, don't let her see you. Nouna—she has come to see Chloris White, the devil's part of you, about young Wood. Don't see her. Remember, she is your child and my wife. Show the angel's side once more. Be true to your own soul. Listen. You are your child's religion. While she worships you, while she holds you the ideal of all that is pure and lovely, the

spirit of good in you is kept alive by her devotion. If you cast yourself down from that altar you kill in yourself everything that is not vile, base, devilish ; you ruin the mind you and I have watched over and kept pure ; you throw yourself and her into an endless hell. You are a woman—you will have pity."

He poured out these words in a hot lava-torrent of passionate emotion which surprised and moved the woman to whom sensations were the breath of life. However, she was not conquered ; she looked up in his face and said with languid insolence :

"So ! One can make fire out of wood at last ! Well, you should have woke up sooner. I intend to see my daughter."

George heard the patter of Nouna's steps on the polished floor of the room within. With one rapid glance at the window, which was some few feet further down the verandah than the spot where he stood, and without one word or sound to warn her of his intention, he snatched Chloris up in his arms, and ran across the lawn towards the river in a slanting direction away from the window, to

a spot where he saw a couple of boats moored to the bank. Utterly taken by surprise, and as instinctively submissive as her sex usually are to a masculine *coup* of this kind, Chloris White scarcely uttered a faint exclamation until, seeing the direction of their course, she asked, coolly:

"Are you going to drown me?"

"No. Though it's what you deserve," he panted briefly. And reaching the boats, he got into the nearest, a solidly built skiff, put Chloris down on the cushioned seat in the stern, pushed the boat off, and paddled her easily with the tide to the shadow of the trees, so that Nouna, if she came to the window, might not see them.

"What do you expect to gain by this astonishing stratagem?" asked Chloris.

"I intend to prevent you seeing Nouna until she has got clear of the house."

"In the mean time young Wood will have met her, she will have found out that Chloris White is at home, and will have made up her mind to wait until she does see me."

George made no answer. He was indeed

considering what step he should take. Luckily for him his silence, which was really the result of want of resource, impressed Chloris White differently. She was not used to being thwarted and treated as a person of small account, and she grew impatient and fretful at being made a fool of. To be forced to sit, with a complexion adapted for the half-light of the verandah and the lamps of the dinner-table, in the full yellow glare of the evening sun, hatless, with no becoming sunshade to throw a soft shadow over her face, exposed without any of the clever artifices of her treasury to the disillusionised stare of the pleasure-crews that rowed past, was an ordeal which subdued the haughty security of this queen of an artificial realm more surely than innocent George could have guessed. She looked up at him, blinking in the unaccustomed strong daylight, with a malignant expression of spiteful hatred, and then looked over the boat-side into the shallow water, cowering miserably before the combined forces of blunt, coarse, overmastering nature, and blunt, coarse, overmastering man.

"Well, you have got your way this once —make the most of it," she said bitterly. "Let me get back on the bank; the sun makes my head ache."

"You will let her go without seeing her?" said George, utterly unconscious in the earnest realities that were occupying him, of the frivolous details which had gained his victory, and suspicious of her good faith.

"Yes, yes, yes, I tell you. She can go and you can go—the sooner the better. I am worn out with your coarse violence; I must go to my room and lie down."

George paddled slowly back to where there was a pathway among the trees. An inkling of the truth broke upon him as he compared the superb disdain and contemptuous coolness with which this woman had treated him in the verandah with the broken-spirited petulance she showed now. He became rather ashamed of his stratagem, and helped the humbled woman to land very gently, with lowered eyes, feeling for the first time a spark of human kinship with her in this little exhibition of unamiable nature. "I am sorry

if I have been rough," said he humbly. "You see I have been much disturbed to-day."

She made no answer, being by this time safe on the bank. She gave him—feeling more at ease already in the shade of the trees—one flashing, enigmatical glance which, while it did not betray her thoughts or her feelings towards him very definitely, yet renewed the impression of evil which her feminine helpless querulousness in the boat had for the time laid in abeyance; then she turned, and letting her golden-coloured gown trail after her on the narrow path, she walked away with the free motion from the hip, and graceful, alluring bearing which had come to her with her Eastern blood. But to George she looked, as she got further and further from his sight in the black and dim recesses of the plantation, like a huge, sinuous serpent, with head and upper part raised from the ground, ready to spring at and coil round its victim.

He remembered with a start that her word was not to be relied on, and bringing the boat with a few strokes back to where he had first found it, he jumped ashore, made

fast the painter, and crossed the lawn rapidly to the window of the drawing-room. Nouna was there alone, leaning over a low chair, utterly absorbed in the picture of Guinevere at the window. She turned round on hearing footsteps, and screamed at sight of her husband. He sprang across the floor to her; but, struck suddenly with a terribly vivid sense of the likeness between her and the wretched woman he had just left, he felt his first impulse to take her in his arms freeze up, and merely said that she must come home with him. She cast a last lingering look of admiration at the paintings on the walls, and let her husband lead her out through the hall, where she tried to lag behind him with inquisitive glances into all the corners, burying her head among the hot-house flowers in a subdued ecstasy of enjoyment, and altogether showing a manifest reluctance to leave this strange little paradise of delights. They walked down the avenue in silence, except that he told her to make haste, and rebuked her rather sharply for a stealthy glance behind her at the house.

At the lodge-gates the fly in which he had come was waiting. When he had helped her in there came upon him a strong sense that he and she—an ill-assorted pair enough, with many a struggle and a heart-pang in store for them—were all that was left, each to the other, in a mass of tumbled ruins of fair prospects that had been solid and stately that morning. And as she cowered, very silent and subdued, expecting a scolding for her escapade, he put his arms round her, just before the sheltered road where they were driving joined the highway, and pressed a fervent, throbbing kiss on her lips. She returned it demonstratively, according to her wont, and then, as they were close upon the High Street, they had to calm down their exuberance, and he asked:

"What were you thinking about, Nouna?"

"I was thinking how lovely it would be to live in a house like that," she answered *naïvely*.

It was natural enough, and George said so to himself, and would not let himself be tortured by the thought that the innocent remark was significant.

CHAPTER II.

THROUGHOUT the journey back to town from Richmond there was, after that brief caress, scarcely more communication between George and his wife than if they had been strangers. Nouna, surprised in a flagrant act of disobedience, was disposed, by the very leniency with which she had been treated, to look upon her husband's reserve as ominous; while he on his own side was too much absorbed in considering what steps he ought next to take to dispel her fears of punishment by so much as a few gentle words.

The fact was that George, who, like other reserved people of strong feelings, could only control the expression of those feelings, when strongly excited, by mounting over himself the strictest guard, wore on this occasion an

unconscious panoply of sternness which was far more alarming to the impressionable Nouna than the most passionate outpouring of invective could have been. As the hansom they had taken from Waterloo Station drove up to the door of their house, and George flung the doors open with a sudden impulsive movement forward as if he would have sprung out without waiting for the driver to pull up, he was recalled to a consciousness of his wife's presence by a frightened moan at his elbow, and looking round hastily, he saw her huddled up in the corner watching him with eyes full of fear. The sight startled him horribly, for the discovery of the evening had poisoned his mind with evil knowledge and rank suspicions.

"What is the matter? Why are you looking frightened?" he asked with a constrained look and tone which seemed to the frightened creature both fierce and harsh.

Nouna drew a long, shivering breath and did not answer, her eyes moving with the helpless, agonised expression of a field-mouse imprisoned for a few moments in human hands. Not in the least understanding the

effect his manner had upon her, Lauriston's suspicions suddenly took form as he remembered the presence of Rahas at Thames Lawn. As a matter of fact Nouna was entirely ignorant that either the Oriental merchant or Sundran was at the house she had just visited with the harmlessly quixotic intention of pleading for Dicky Wood. But Lauriston could not know that, could scarcely at that moment have believed his wife's oath if she had sworn the truth. He turned sharply round in his seat to get a full view of her face, and she, scared out of all self-control, uttered a little shriek. He did not touch her, he did not attempt to reassure her; with a heavy, hopeless sigh he turned away, took off his hat, and passed his hand over his forehead. They had reached home, the footman was advancing from the open door; George noticed with disgust that the man must have witnessed the little scene. He got out and held out his hand to his wife, who rejected it and hung back until he quietly gave place to the servant, and walked to meet the Colonel, the sight of whom on

the pathway a short distance from the house, had been the cause of his start forward in the hansom.

As the two men met they exchanged eager, anxious glances.

"Well!" said the Colonel shortly.

Lauriston, who looked haggard, white, and shaken, waited for him to speak further.

"What has—she done?"

Unwilling so much as to mention the name of the woman he reluctantly acknowledged as his daughter, Lord Florencecourt glanced towards the house she had just entered to indicate whom he meant.

"Done! What has she done? God knows."

"Well, what do you suspect? You can speak out to me; I am not sensitive now. Has she done—the worst? You looked at her as if you could have killed her. I saw as you passed."

Poor George stared at him in consternation.

"I looked—at my wife—as if I could have killed her!" he repeated stupidly.

"Yes, by Jove, you did."

George said nothing more for a few

moments, being altogether shocked to learn that he could become unconsciously the most repulsive of tyrants to the very creature whom, in all the wreck of his life and his hopes, he unswervingly and with a new smarting fervour, adored.

"I suppose," he said at last, "I'm going off my head. I swear I hadn't the least idea there was anything unusual in my manner. Poor little thing!" he murmured abstractedly, while the Colonel continued to regard him very curiously.

George turned instinctively towards his home, and glanced through the trees at the windows of his wife's room with a great yearning in his whole face. The Colonel put his arm briskly through the young man's, and tried to lead him towards the nearest gate. They had wandered into Kensington Gardens.

"Come and dine with me at the Wellington Club. I've called twice at your place since I left you, and have been hovering about ever since on the look-out for you. Come—a glass of Rudesheimer——"

George drew back. "No, thanks, Colonel;

I can't come to-night. I must go back to my wife. You see—leaving her like that——"

He stammered and stopped. The Colonel considered him again attentively.

"You've not been telling her anything of our talk this afternoon, have you?" he asked, with a shade of contempt. "I cannot understand that craze of a newly-married man to be babbling of all his affairs to his wife. I should as soon think of consulting a new hunter as to an investment in Consols."

"I have told her nothing."

"Then what is the matter with you? You look more upset than you did this afternoon."

"I have seen Nouna's mother."

The Colonel's jaw dropped, and his irritability suddenly disappeared.

"Madame di—di Valdestillas?" he said in a subdued, tentative tone.

"Oh, no; I've had my way. There's an end once for all to all humbug," answered George bitterly. "I've seen Chloris White."

They both remained silent for a while. Truly after this there seemed little to be said. At last the Colonel said in a low voice :

"Now, my boy, you see what I've had to live through the last few years. You don't wonder any longer at my opinion of women?"

But George felt no sympathetic softening. He thought that a man should make sure of the death of his first wife before he married a second, and that he should show a little human feeling for his own daughter.

"I don't wonder either, Colonel, at Chloris White's opinion of men," he said drily.

"You think you have a grievance against me, I see."

"Frankly, I do. Why didn't you make a clean breast of it when you found it was I who had married your daughter? You might have trusted me, Colonel, as if I had had no tongue; you know that. And you saw me fall into a villainous trap and live on that infamous woman's money. O God! The thought of it! When just a whisper would have put me right."

"Well, well, the murder's out now, and one sees things differently. I knew what your wife's influence over you was, and I thought if I breathed a word it would get to her ears and

set her clamouring for her pitiful title. A man's a weak thing in a beautiful woman's hands, as no one knows better than I. I'll do what I can for you; I'm bound to, and I will. What do you propose to do?"

"Resign my commission, give back every cursed penny I can, and get employment abroad to work off the rest."

Lord Florencecourt looked up startled.

"Resign your commission! You mustn't think of that. The worst's over now; it is I, not you, who have anything to fear from the devil. Give up your house, of course; I'll allow you five hundred, six hundred a year. You are quite free from any obligation, for I acknowledge your wife is my daughter, and her mother would force me in any case to contribute to her support. Do you see?"

"Quite. I accept your offer, Colonel, in this way. You shall allow Nouna five hundred a year until we have cleared off every farthing we have spent under a misapprehension. But for the future my wife and I will live on my earnings and what I have besides of my own."

"But why leave the army?"

"Cowardice, partly. I feel disgraced and beaten down, and I've lost heart for the old ambitions. And—I have other reasons. Over here there is a constant risk of Nouna's meeting——"

He hurried this last sentence, but stopped abruptly in the middle of it.

"You might exchange. Come now, that would solve all difficulties. Nobody would know the style you used to keep here, and you could make a fresh start quietly."

George considered the proposal for a few seconds, and then shook his head.

"Look here, Colonel, it's no use denying it; I'm broke—as surely as a man who's gone to the dogs on his own account; the only difference is that I've been thrown to 'em. There's an awfulness about the thing I've been made to do that has bowled me over—pride, self-respect, and all. I shall work round again all right, I've no doubt, but I can't set to it in England or in the army. Help me to get away as fast as I can; it's the greatest kindness you can do me."

He had made up his mind past gainsaying. The Colonel was deeply moved, self-reproach adding force to his compassion.

"If you won't be persuaded," he began slowly, "I suppose I must help you your own way. How would Paris suit you?"

"Any place would suit me where I could get anything to do. And Paris would be lively for Nouna," he added, half to himself.

The Colonel would have preferred that Nouna's name should be left out of the discussion. He continued: "A young American, a connection of Lady Millard's, who is engaged in a bank here called the 'London, New York, and Chicago,' was telling me at their place a few nights ago that the firm intend to start a branch establishment in Paris; for the use chiefly of the English and American colonies. They have an opening for a young man of good birth and address. It's a wretched thing, I know, for you," he went on with a change of voice, glancing again regretfully from head to foot of the handsome young soldier.

"Can you get it for me?" asked Lauriston, with a first sign of eagerness.

"I think so, but—the salary is miserable and——"

"What will they give?"

"Something like a hundred and twenty at the outside to begin with. It's starvation."

"Not a bit of it. It's more than my pay."

"Yes, but your wife!"

"My wife?" George's face broke with a ray of a smile. "She shall be all right. She is no more than a bird to keep; and we shall live very near the housetops, where she will be at home."

In fact, the idea of having her all to himself again sprang up a bright little fountain in desolation, unlooked for in his breast. The Colonel pulled his moustache. Nouna, he thought, was the sort of bird to make a very uncomfortable flapping against the bars of any but the most expensive of cages.

"When can I know whether they will give me the berth?" George asked.

"I almost think, from the manner in which they spoke, that what I should say about you

would settle it. They are particular as to the stamp of man. You could hear in a week."

"How soon can I get away, Colonel ?"

"As soon as you like; I'll see that it's all right."

"Thanks. I want to wind up all my affairs here quietly, and slip away at any moment when I have arranged for the payment of the debts we have incurred."

"You can make me security for those. And, by the by, I can give you some good introductions in Paris."

"Many thanks, Colonel, but it would only be prolonging the social death-struggle. One can only die game to society on—on the income we shall have."

"Don't you think, for your wife's sake, you are wrong in resolving to be so independent ? How will you keep her amused ?"

"Oh, that won't be difficult in Paris. The very air is more exhilarating than here, and she is just the person to appreciate its pleasures."

"But the pleasures ladies love are no cheaper there than here, remember."

Lauriston would not be cheated out of the rags of comfort he had collected for himself, and Lord Florencecourt was obliged to leave him without even discovering how small the income was to which the young fellow was trusting. The money he had inherited from his aunt—all he had to depend on besides what his own work could produce—brought him in only a little over a hundred a year; and he had even been obliged to encroach upon next year's income in the early days of his marriage, when it seemed easier to trust to the literary work he had been promised for the future than to refuse his new-made wife the pretty trifles she set her heart upon. Now the idea of making money by writing again occurred to him, and pricked him to instant action with the thought that something might still be made of life if Nouna could only be induced to be happy in her changed circumstances. This was Lauriston's weak side. He knew that if Chloris White chose to be as bad as her word, and to excite Rahas's evil thirst for Nouna's beauty, he should have to enter into a conflict with a

stealthy and unscrupulous enemy, the thought of whose underhand weapons filled him with fury and loathing. He must get away with his wife at once, as secretly as he could, trusting that the mother might overpower the fiend in Chloris, and induce her to leave her child safe in the care of a man whom she must at least respect. In the mean time the change in their circumstances must be made known to Nouna without delay.

George returned to the big house which was so detestably impregnated with the thought of Chloris and her vilely earned money, and inquiring for his wife, learnt that she was in her bath. This was with Nouna by no means the perfunctory daily ceremony of Europeans, but was a luxurious pleasure in which she spent many hours of the hot summer days, having had a room fitted up to recall, as far as possible, her dim half-imagined memories of the cool inner courts of an Indian palace. George knocked at the door and Nouna, recognising the tread, in a timid and uncertain voice bade him come in. The room was paved and wainscoted with

tiles; the bath, a large one six feet square, but only three deep, was sunk into the floor with two steps down into the water on all the sides, the whole being lined with sea-green tiles that gave a pretty tint to the water. A lamp hung in brass chains from the ceiling; a long mirror reaching down to the ground occupied the middle of the wall. A sofa, a rug, a table with fruit and coffee, and a little window conservatory with thin lace curtains before it, were all the rest of the furniture. Nouna, in a blue and white cotton garment which was no great encumbrance, was peering up from the corner of the bath furthest from the door like a frightened water-nix. As George came over to her, she made straight for the opposite corner, and seeing that she did not mean to be approached nearer, he moved away from the bath and sat down on the sofa.

"I frightened you just now, I am afraid, Nouna," he began in a very humble voice.

"No-o," she answered, plucking up spirit as she saw she was safe from attack.

"I mean, perhaps you thought me cross

and—and rough, because I didn't talk to you much on the way home."

"You were cross and rough."

"Well, I'm very sorry, for I didn't mean to be. I had had news which upset me and made me so wretched that I forgot everything else."

"What news?" she asked very softly, sliding through the water to the side of the bath nearest to him, and leaning her bare wet arms on the tiles of the floor. For she began, now that her fright was over, to see that he was unhappy.

He paused for a few moments to consider how he should best break it to her. At last it came out, however, with masculine bluntness.

"You know what you would say, Nouna, if you heard that there had been a mistake —about the money—supposed to be left us, and that we were as poor as ever again, and had to give up this house and everything—even your jewels!"

The water all round the poor child began to quiver with little widening ripples, as she

trembled at the shock of this most dire calamity; even his previous suggestion of it seemed to have had no effect in softening the blow. As for George, he felt that all the previous horrors of the miserable day had produced no pang so acute as the one he now felt, when he had to deal with his own hands the blow which crushed, for the time at least, all the bright happiness of the only creature he loved in the world. He sat like a culprit, with hanging head and loosely clasped hands, too much afraid of breaking down himself to attempt to soften the gloomy picture by a word of hope. It was she who broke the silence first.

"My jewels! No, I sha'n't have to give those up," she whispered eagerly, "for they were given me by mamma!"

George looked at her with haggard eyes, noticing that the mere mention of her mother soothed her, let in a ray of sweet sunshine at once upon the black-looking prospect.

"But supposing we were so badly in debt that even they had to be sold!" he suggested in a hoarse voice that he tried in vain to clear.

"Then I should drown myself!" cried Nouna tragically, and she descended a step lower into the water as if to fulfil the dread purpose immediately.

"What, Nouna!" cried George, "don't you think me worth living for? Do you think, when I've lost everything else, you ought to take away just what would console me for it all? Do you, Nouna?"

She hung her head, and crawling, meek and ashamed like a truant dog, out of the water, laid herself face downwards on the tiled floor at a little distance from his feet. But when he stooped towards her she said, her voice ringing out with passionate sincerity:

"Don't touch me! Let me lie here till I'm good, and then you may pick me up and forgive me."

"But listen. I've something else to tell you, something that perhaps you will like to hear.

"What is it?" She raised her head and looked up at him.

"We shall be very poor, as I told you, and sha'n't be able to have a nice house, or

many pretty things. But I'm going to take you to live in Paris——"

"Paris!" He had scarcely uttered the word when she repeated it like a shout of triumph, and springing up from the floor, snatched a lace-bordered and embroidered sheet which was lying on a little white porcelain stove in one corner of the room, and wrapping it round her with one dexterous sweeping movement, slipped off her bathing-dress like a loose skin from underneath it, and flinging herself on to the sofa beside her husband, put a transformed and glowing face up to his, as she whispered in a tone of rapture: "Then I don't mind anything —anything, for I shall see mamma!"

With an uncontrollable impulse George drew himself away from her and started to his feet. He felt sick, and a film gathered before his eyes, preventing him from finding the handle of the door, which he sought with cold, clammy fingers.

"George!" said a low voice behind him. He scarcely heard, scarcely recognised it, and made no answer.

"George!" A little hand found its way to his throat, and was laid against his neck.

His arms fell down listlessly, and as he stood still and felt that he was touched by clinging fingers, and heard Nouna's voice in its most caressing tones, his sight came again; he looked down and put his hands on his wife's shoulder.

"Why are you going away, George? Why are you going away?"

"I don't feel well, dearest."

"Well, sit by me, and I will take your head in my lap and nurse you."

She led him gently back to the sofa. But presently, when she had curled herself up in a corner of it, and making him lie full length had pillowed his head upon her breast, and administered kisses and *eau de Cologne* alternately with great lavishness, she peered into his face with a new inspiration, and said mysteriously:

"You are not ill—you are unhappy."

He protested he was only grieving at the change in their fortunes for her sake.

Nouna laughed gently. "I was silly," she

said, "and wicked. In the first moments of surprise one does not know what one says. I don't mind at all. I would rather be poor in Paris than rich in London."

He shivered, though Nouna, with some tact, believing he was jealous, had not mentioned her mother again. But she examined his face attentively, and saw that the drawn, hopeless look remained. After a few moments she slipped her shoulder away very tenderly from beneath his head, which she transferred to a cushion; and George heard the door softly shut after her as she went out. He called to her, but she took no notice, and he supposed she had gone to dress. But in a few minutes the ghost-like figure glided in again, looking just the same, and came to where he was now sitting upright on the sofa.

"There!" she said triumphantly, and she put her jewellery, piece by piece, down to a little gold bar brooch which he had given her before their marriage, into her husband's pockets. "You can go and sell them this minute if you like. You see I don't mind

a bit. Not—a—bit," she repeated deliberately, and then looked into his face to see whether this willing act of self-sacrifice had brought him consolation.

George smiled at her and told her she was a good child; but his smile was still very sad, and the hand which he placed on her shoulder trembled. Then Nouna, who was sitting on the rug at his feet, began to cry quietly; their usual mutual position was reversed; it was she who now wanted to get nearer to him, and did not know how. A strange deadness seemed to have come over him, so that he did not notice even her tears. He was indeed arranging his plans for their departure from England, with some distrust of his wife's fortitude at the end. At last, when amazement at this singular state of affairs had dried her eyes, and she had sat mournfully staring at her husband in utter silence for some minutes, a light broke upon her face, and she sprang up suddenly into a kneeling position. Joining her hands together above his knees like a child, and looking out instinctively at the glimpse of

darkening sky visible between the leaves of the plants in her little window conservatory, she said with all the solemnity and timidity of a person who is undertaking for the first time an arduous responsibility:

"Pray God to comfort my husband George, if I cannot."

This startled George and broke him up altogether, reserve and fortitude and manly dignity and all. He snatched her up in his arms with such impetuous haste that her slippers flew off and exposed little pink toes to the air, and enfolding her in a hug that went nigh to stopping her breath, burst into sobs like a hungry and beaten child.

CHAPTER III.

To George Lauriston's infinite surprise and comfort, his young wife, instead of dealing him fresh wounds in his misfortune by lamentations over their altered lot, fell quite naturally into the woman's part of helpmeet, and eased the wrench of breaking from his old career by an unwavering brightness and sweetness which woke in him the fairest hopes of what their life together might yet be. On the other hand, this sudden change from winsome wilfulness to still more winsome womanliness could not fail to rouse in him some anxiety as to its cause. Had she received any communication from her mother, either through the hateful Rahas or some other channel? Her secretive nature made it difficult to discover the truth on such points.

"Why are you so kind to me now, little woman?" he asked her two days after the memorable return from Norfolk, when their preparations for departure were already half made.

"Kind! Wasn't I always kind to you?" she asked, not quite evasively, yet with more understanding than she affected to have.

"Yes, but not quite in the same sweet way."

"Ah ha! It's the pictures and the music and the sermons you've taken me to beginning to have an effect at last," she said, not flippantly, for though she laughed her eyes began to glisten.

George was touched, but greatly puzzled.

"Have you heard anything from Sundran since she left?" asked he carelessly, after allowing an interval to elapse so that the question might appear to have no connection with what had gone before.

"No," said Nouna; then, after a pause, she looked up at her husband mysteriously. "Do you know what I think?"

"Well!"

"I believe she has managed, how I don't know, to find her way back to mamma. I've been thinking it over a great deal, and I fancy when she found out the Colonel,"—(she lowered her voice)—"she thought she ought to let mamma know where to find him." And Nouna finished with a slow emphatic nod of her small head.

"That's a very clever suggestion," said George, who indeed had reason to think so. He felt relieved, for Nouna's want of candour had never gone the length of deliberately planned deceit, and he decided upon the strength of this short dialogue that she had heard nothing.

The real reason of his wife's altered conduct was not likely to occur to him. Coming of a race which places the one sex in such complete subjection to the other that confidence between them is impossible, she possessed, together with that cautious over-reticence which is the weapon of the weak, its correlative virtue—a delicate tact which avoided a sensitive place discreetly, and made no attempt to lay bare a wound which her

lord wished to conceal. Something had happened to make George unhappy—this kind husband which had cherished her so tenderly, who had denied her no proof of his affection. Her woman's heart was deeply touched; if she had any curiosity it could wait for its satisfaction until by and by when he was better; in the mean time she would be loyally good to him, even to the extent of checking her secret sobs over the parting with the plants and perfumes and knick-knacks which had grown into her frivolity-loving heart.

George got the bank appointment, through the efforts of Lord Florencecourt, who told him he had had a close race with a connection of the man who was to be manager of the Paris branch.

"He's a disagreeable man, the manager, Mr. Gurton," said the Colonel. "I hope you'll get on all right with him. The young fellow he wanted to get in is a lad he calls his nephew, but by all accounts he is what nephews have a trick of turning out to be. Gurton is rather savage over the disappoint-

ment; fortunately I was able to prove that the lad is not so steady as he might be."

"Thank you, Colonel. It's very good of you to take so much trouble. I'm sorry about the mysterious nephew. Unless he's an exceptionally just man, it will make him so ready to find fault with me. And of course I'm quite raw to the work."

"Oh, I don't think it's difficult—mere routine for the most part. My boy, it is a shame for you to be tied to such work."

"Well, all work is routine; it can't be worse for that than the army. And then there are prizes. Who knows but I may end my days as a prosperous banker, with an income which would make a General's mouth water?"

Between the Colonel's hearty friendship and help on the one hand, and Nouna's unexpected and discreet sympathy on the other, Lauriston was beginning to realise that the worst stains of the degradation he had felt so keenly might in time be wiped out; and in this reaction he was inclined at first to lose remembrance of Chloris White's threats, and to look upon the smallness of his means

as the present difficulty which would need the sternest grappling with. He could not bear the thought of plunging his wife straight from the unbridled extravagance and luxury which she had lately enjoyed with so keen a zest to an existence more meagre than that which had palled upon her so soon in the first days of their marriage. That she was preparing with great fortitude for such a plunge was proved to him the day before they started. She was rather silent and abstracted at dinner that evening, and when it was over she walked with a listless and melancholy tread into the quaint drawing-rooms, the shelves and brackets of which George found were bare of their load of fantastic trifles. Fans, screens, mirrors, ivory carvings, all had disappeared; only half a dozen small porcelain vases, filled with fresh flowers that morning, remained.

"You've been packing up, I see, busy little woman," said George, trying to speak cheerfully, as he stood with his arm round her in the room which already began to wear a desolate look, as if the soul had died out of it.

"No, not packing, only making a list of them. Here it is. I thought they could pack them up themselves after we were gone," she said sadly.

By "they" she indicated with a shudder the mysterious enemies who were driving forth her and her husband from their beautiful home, and forcing them to make horrid things called inventories of her little Turkish tables, and the soft sofas on which she had been so fond of resting, and the big oak bookcase which was the pride of George's heart. She held out two or three half-sheets of her husband's foolscap paper, closely scribbled on both sides with her spidery, illegible writing.

"What's this?" asked George, running his eyes over it and reading aloud at random. "'One pair of pink garters with silver clasps, and with a little knob come off the clasp of one!'" He turned to the next page and read: "'Two fans with pearl handles and one with tortoiseshell which I have never used. Except once'" was screwed into the space above as an afterthought. George

picked out another item. "'A hand-mirror that makes you look pretty, as if you had a crown on, for the top is a silver coronet.'" Further on the entries grew fuller and more eloquent, as if the very description of the beauty of her treasures had become a labour of love. "'Two lovely embroidered dresses, one pale blue silk, all over little silver birds with their little wings spread out as if they were flying in the sky. The other is pink with white roses and lilies, very nearly as pretty as the other one, and besides it is less worn.'" Even her velvet slippers, each pair described with loving minuteness, were faithfully put down.

"They are all there; I haven't kept back anything, indeed," explained Nouna in great haste, as George, after reading some *naïve* entries in silence, turned his back upon her, a proceeding which seemed to her ominous. "I've only kept just the things I had before we came here."

But then he put his arms round her quite suddenly, and held her close to him as he said:

"And who do you think will be able to get into those little doll's garments of yours if you leave them behind? The frocks might do for babies' gowns, certainly, and the red velvet slippers might be hung upside down for watch-pockets, but they will never find grown-up people small enough to wear them, my word for it!"

Nouna twisted her left shoulder up to her uneasily, and a little haughtily; she had considered the drawing up of this list as a very business-like proceeding, and now she was being laughed at for it. Her husband saw this in time to kiss away the gathering frown. His own taste would have preferred the sacrifice of the dainty though now most inappropriate wardrobe; but he knew that during long hours of the day he should have to be away from his wife, and as experience had taught him that she could find more entertainment in an embroidered sash than in the whole literature of the English language, and that moreover her moral qualities could shine out strongly upon occasion in spite of this unorthodox taste, he decided

that she should have the solace in exile of all her private treasures except the jewels, which he intended to despatch to Chloris White at the moment of leaving England.

"You think I mind giving these things up!" Nouna said superbly. "But I am not a child; they are nothing to me."

Nevertheless, when her husband told her he would help her to pack them up, as they were of no use to any one but her, she leapt about the room for joy, and rushed off to take advantage of the permission in a state of frantic excitement.

They got safely away from England within a week of the fateful visit to "Thames Lawn," all difficulties being smoothed away by the co-operation of the Colonel, who, while he made no effort to see his daughter again, did everything in his power to help her and her husband to get away quickly and quietly. They prided themselves on managing everything very neatly, and both men hoped that the young husband and wife would be able to get lost, not only to the world, but to the vicious and vindictive Chloris White,

even without the adoption of a feigned name, which the Colonel advised, but which Lauriston declined to resort to.

"If they made up their minds to find me, Nouna's peculiar beauty would be clue enough to track me by to the end of the world," said he. "I have done nothing to disgrace my name, and it's one of my deepest wishes to make my wife so proud of it that she will forget that she ever had any other."

They started in the early morning from Charing Cross, Lord Florencecourt meeting them at the station to see them off. The greeting between father and daughter was a curious one. Nouna, whose prejudice against the Colonel had hitherto found vent in avoidance or in sauciness, now received him with a low bow and humble touch of the hand of decorous respect, while in her lowered eyes hatred of the man who had abandoned her mother struggled with her strong native sense of the majesty of a father. The Colonel's manner, on the other hand, was nervous and jerky. He was grieved to lose Lauriston, delighted to lose his daughter, and haunted by a dread

of what his demon wife might take it into her head to do now she was foiled in her cherished ambition for her child. He had brought a beautiful basket of roses for Mrs. Lauriston, and he insisted on paying for their tickets himself, to save poor Nouna what he thought might be the shock of travelling second-class. When, as the train started, Nouna saw that, on shaking hands with her husband, the Colonel's eyes grew moist and kindly, she relented, and leaning far out of the carriage window, bestowed upon her amazed and unwilling father a kiss which, being justified only by that relationship which he was trying so hard to conceal, was scarcely less unwelcome than a charge of grapeshot.

The train was out of sight before he recovered a degree of serenity, which was shaken immediately afterwards by a glimpse he caught, as he was leaving the station, of a tall, lean man wearing a red fez, who came out by a different door, and crossing the inclosure in front with quick strides, was lost to his sight among the crowd in the Strand. Although George had not informed him of

all he feared from Rahas, he had told him enough about this dark-skinned agent of Chloris White's to make the Colonel suspect that with all their care they had not succeeded in evading her evil vigilance. At first he thought he would warn George, but reflecting how common foreign headgear of all sorts is in London, he decided that he had not enough grounds for disturbing so soon the poor fellow's sense of security.

With their arrival in Paris began the third era in the married life of George and his wife. Nouna's delight in the bright city was so great that at first the fact of having to live in two small rooms on the fourth floor of a house in a narrow street off the Boulevard Poissonnière was of no account compared with the knowledge of the pleasures that lay outside, the walks along the lighted boulevards in the evening before the shops were shut, the expeditions on a tramcar to the Bois de Boulogne or Saint Cloud, above all the Sunday trips upon the Seine on a steamer, all joys within the reach of a most modest purse, were delirious excitements to her susceptible tem-

perament, in the first ecstasy of which the handsome house at Kensington, the tropical plants, the supper parties, even the services of her servant Sundran, were for the time forgotten. On one memorable Sunday they indulged in a drive round the Bois in a *fiacre*, and in ices at the little *châlet* restaurant opposite the cascade, where the lower middle-class brides come in all their bravery of white satin and long veil and orange-blossom wreath, looking coquettish, happy, and at ease in the unaccustomed attire which an English girl of the same class wears with such shamefaced awkwardness. To Nouna that day gave a glimpse of Paradise: the *fiacre* was more comfortable than her victoria in London had been, Hyde Park could not compare with the Bois, the passers-by amused, the ice intoxicated her. When the sunshine had faded into twilight, and they had driven back home through the lighted streets, she climbed up the long flights of stairs, still in a silent ecstasy, and sat down in a little low chair George had bought for her, seeing nothing in the gloom but moving carriages, and small

trees growing thickly round a lake that glittered in sunshine, and pretty mock *châlets* and a ridiculous little waterfall that fell from nothing into nowhere.

Presently she got up and went out on to the broad balcony which, encroaching upon the size of the rooms, was yet the chief charm of this little home under the roof. She had hung one corner of it with curtains, and George had contrived a canvas awning under which, when the weather was fine, she spent most of the hours of his absence. Her husband watched without following her as she leaned upon the rail and looked out at the yellow glow in the west which could still be seen behind the housetops. Suddenly she turned and came back to him. Standing just within the window with her back to the fading light, her face could not be seen; but her voice rang out with a strange vibration as she called to him, holding her arms towards him:

"George, why don't you come out to me?"

He was with her in a moment, found her trembling and dry-lipped, and tried to per-

suade her to lie down while he called to the old woman from whom they rented the rooms, to prepare their supper. But Nouna shook her head, and insisted on his remaining with her by the window. Yes, she was tired, she admitted, but she wanted the air; she would go out on the balcony again if he would go with her. As she seemed to desire it, he let her lead him out, all the time keeping her eyes fixed in a remarkable manner immovably on his face.

"Look out," she said, "at the sky—at the houses—at all you can see."

He let his gaze pass obediently from her face to the pale-starred sky, the grey-blue of which was merging into the last red rays of the disappearing sunset; to the house-roofs and chimney-pots, of which they had a good though not an extensive view, to the street below, with its little globes of yellow light, and the dark specks which were all he could see of the moving passengers. Then he turned to her curiously.

"Well, little one, I have looked at everything."

"And you see nothing—nothing strange at all?"

"There's a tabby cat two roofs off," said the prosaic male doubtfully.

"No, no," she interrupted impatiently, still without moving her eyes from his face. "Down below us—on the opposite side—a little to the left—in the black shade." Her voice had sunk gradually into a whisper. Then she stopped.

"Well, I see nothing."

"Not at the house where they have a floor shut up?"

George stepped forward and leaned over the rail of the balcony as she had done, Nouna following closely and clinging to his hand. On the opposite side, about three doors down, there was a flat on the third floor which had borne during the first days of their residence in Paris a large board inscribed '*À louer*.' George saw that the board was gone, and that one of the shutters was thrown back.

"Oh, I see they've let it. Well, there's nothing to be frightened about in that, my child."

"You don't notice anything else—anything strange—you don't see any—person?"

George started, and looked down again with searching eagerness along the line of dead-eyed shuttered windows.

"No, child, there is nobody."

Nouna heaved a long sigh, and looked timidly down through her husband's arm.

"No, it's—gone," she whispered.

"What is gone, dear? Tell me what you saw," said George caressingly, as he drew her back into the little sitting-room, where a lamp now shed its soft light over the white table-cloth, and Madame Barbier, who adored the picturesque young English couple, was arranging the supper in a dainty and appetising fashion.

Nouna rubbed her eyes, and clinging to her husband's arm, let the words of her recital drop from her lips in a slow, hesitating, and faltering manner, as if she were fast asleep, and her brain were working sluggishly under the half-paralysing influence of a will stronger than her own.

"I was sitting in here," she said, "and

thinking of all the happiness we have had to-day—the soft air and the warm sun, and your kind eyes upon me, and all the lovely things we saw—the beautiful ladies and the shining water, and the lights among the trees in the Champ Elysées when we came back. And all at once," her hands tightened their hold upon his sleeve, "I felt that I must get up and go out—there upon the balcony; and I looked out at the sky right in front where it was yellow like flame, and all the pretty pictures of the day I saw quite plainly still in my mind. But then—I don't know how—I felt my eyes drawn down from the bright sky, and there down below me—to the left, I saw all black gloom, and in it I seemed to see Rahas' room in Mary Street, with all the pretty toys and bright shawls about just as he used to put them for me to look at. And in the middle Rahas himself, only not kind and gentle as he used to be, but with a wicked cruel face, and burning eyes that frightened me. And I felt afraid, as if I could have screamed. It seemed so strange, for even when he used to look fierce, as he did some-

times, I never minded, and I was never frightened. Was it a dream, George, that I saw? And if it was only a dream, why was I afraid?"

Chiming in so appropriately with his own fears, this vision or fancy of Nouna's disturbed George a little. He calmed her excitement as well as he could, and found some comfort in the fact that the crafty Oriental had appeared to her, not as the kindly friend he had always professed to be, but as a person inspiring horror. This seemed the more remarkable as George had never mentioned the name of Rahas to his wife since their wedding-day; he came, after a little reflection, to look upon the vision as a proof of the new sympathy which Nouna began to show with his own feelings, and to rejoice in the fact that as the bond between him and his wife grew strong under the influence of his patient tenderness, the power of any enemy to disturb their happiness was proportionately lessened. This home peace, which was attaching Lauriston to his young wife more strongly every day, was the more grateful to him, as his

duties at the Bank were rendered as irksome as possible to him through the prejudice of his chief, Mr. Gurton, who never forgave the rejection of his own candidate for the junior clerk's post, and who scarcely concealed his wish to find against him some lawful ground of dissatisfaction. This George was careful not to give.

Mr. Gurton was one of those disagreeable brutes who seem to be created as foils to show up the amiability and sweetness of ordinary humanity. He was offensive to his few friends ; he was unendurable to the far greater number of people whom nothing but necessity threw in his way. But as a man of business he was clear-headed, shrewd, and enterprising, so exact and penetrating that, even if he drank, as his many detractors alleged, there seemed to be no particular reason why he should not, as his business faculties could not be said to be less keen at one time than at another. He hated Lauriston from the first, bullied him on the smallest or on no occasion, and did all in his power to induce the young fellow to throw up his appointment. George

took soft words and sour with dogged quietness, and applied himself with all the energy of his character to mastering every detail connected with his new profession, as serenely as if incivility had been his daily bread for years. As a matter of fact, the discourtesy and fault-finding of his chief did not trouble him much; he looked upon Gurton, not without reason, as an ill-bred brute whom one could only turn to account by noting the methods by which he had attained such a splendid dexterity in the management of affairs, and by thus considering him in the light of a noisy machine it was easy to take the sting out of his insults. At the same time this constant friction or avoidance of friction in his business life made home and wife doubly dear and sweet to him.

On the day following Nouna's strange vision on the balcony, he came home at the usual time, and asked her whether she had had any more "waking dreams." She answered, reluctantly and shyly, that she had not been on the balcony at all that day. George laughed at her, and told her she

should go with him, as the presence of such a coarse creature as a man was a sure preventative of visions. She allowed him to lead her out, being quite brave with the combined forces of husband and sunlight. When they got on the balcony, however, and looked to the left at the house where Nouna had fancied she saw Rahas, a sight met their eyes which, whether a coincidence or not, was strange enough to deepen the unpleasant impression of the evening before.

For the shutters of the uninhabited third floor were now thrown back, and outside the balcony hung a long strip of white calico with this inscription in broad blue letters: "Bazar Oriental."

George and Nouna read the words, and looked at each other in troubled amazement.

"I'll have this cleared up to-night," thought George to himself.

CHAPTER IV.

When, true to his determination, George Lauriston visited the new establishment that evening and insisted on seeing the proprietor, an explanation offered itself which robbed Nouna's vision of most of the mystery attaching to it. For a dapper little Frenchman, who tried to live up to his obviously assumed business title of Ben Hassan by wearing a scarlet fez and a pair of Turkish slippers, immediately appeared behind the servant who opened the door, and announcing himself with a flourishing bow as the proprietor, thrust into Lauriston's hand a business card, and begged him to inspect his stock, adding that perhaps Monsieur would do him the honour to inaugurate his business and bring him good luck by purchasing some trifle. George consented.

The Oriental bazaar consisted of three rooms fitted up with trestles on which were placed trays full of trumpery, gilt sequin necklaces cheap scarves, and other so-called Eastern wares, such as may be bought for a very small sum in the smaller shops along the Rue de Rivoli. George bought a little feather hand-screen, obviously an "article de Paris," and returned to his wife quite satisfied that it was the sight of Monsieur Ben Hassan's red fez at one of the windows which had conjured up in her excited imagination the ground-floor in Mary Street and its younger occupant.

In order to convince his wife of her mistake, George took her next day to the establishment of Monsieur Ben Hassan, and was pleased to find that the nervous fear which had haunted her since her supposed vision faded away in the amusement of turning over the cheap trinkets and toys around her, as the obsequious proprietor, an active and voluble little Parisian, who would have been invaluable as a showman at a country fair, encouraged her to do. George

asked him, to satisfy Nouna, whether he had not had a friend with him on the balcony two evenings before, a foreign gentleman, in whom, he said, he thought he recognised an old acquaintance. Ben Hassan said No, he had been working by himself to prepare his "Bazaar" for opening on the following day, and he had been alone except for the occasional assistance of the servant. He admitted also, with a charmingly candid shrug of the shoulders, that his name of Ben Hassan was assumed, that in private life he was simply Jules Dubois, and that there was no gentleman in the business who came from further East than the Faubourg Saint Antoine.

Nouna, to tell the truth, hardly listened to this explanation. She was at heart still so much a child as to find, in trying on Tunisian earrings at a franc and a half a pair, and gold crescent brooches that could not be warranted to retain their colour a second time of wearing, as much pleasure as she had felt, a few weeks back, in decking herself with her wedding diamonds. Noticing this, the artful Ben Hassan informed the lady that he expected,

in the course of a few days, a consignment of Indian jewellery which would be well worthy of Madame's attention, as it was the most marvellously cheap and beautiful assortment that had ever been seen in France. Nouna's face glowed with interest, which was repressed for the moment by her husband, who said coldly that Madame did not wear imitation jewellery; a statement which seemed calculated to be received with doubt, as Madame, now hung from head to foot with gilt chains and spangled handkerchiefs, was evidently very well satisfied with herself. However, the tactful Parisian bowed low and apologised, humbly observing that the wares in question were continually mounted, by desire of well-known ladies of the Boulevard Saint Germains, with real gems of the highest value. Nouna divested herself of the trinkets with manifest regret, and was with difficulty persuaded by her husband to buy a string of sandal-wood beads instead of the barbaric rows of eye-dazzling brass on which her choice had first fallen. George was rather shocked; a taste for cheap

finery in his wife seemed quite a new and startling development. As soon as they got on the stairs outside he said, in a low and puzzled voice:

"You wouldn't really care to have those gimcrack things, would you, Nouna?"

She wanted to sit down on the stairs and take the paper off her beads: stopping in the act, she looked up at him with a laugh, but yet showing a gleam of serious meaning in her red-brown eyes.

"Why not, if I can't have real ones?" she said with a note of pathos in her voice. "If I had rich things I should sell them to give you money. But these poor ones I can keep and do you no harm."

And George had a lump in his throat, as he often had now at innocent speeches like this from his wife, which showed the dawnings of a new womanly sympathy with him side by side with the old childish love of finery and glitter.

She showed, by certain impulsive remarks in the course of the next few days, a deep interest in the "marvellously cheap and

beautiful assortment of Indian jewellery," of which the sham Arabian had spoken; and when, towards the end of the week, Monsieur Ben Hassan called one evening, not, as he assured the young Englishman, with the intention of persuading him to buy the mock gems which he had been informed Madame did not wear, but merely to justify in the eyes of Monsieur the praises which he had lavished on his own wares, Nouna showed so much eagerness to see them that George had not the heart to deny her the pleasure. Ben Hassan proceeded, by the light of the lamp which stood on the table amidst the remnants of the dessert, to unfasten a little flat box which he carried, to take out a layer of cotton-wool, and to display, against the velvet lining, rows of flashing white gems which caused Nouna to cry out with irrepressible admiration and longing.

"I flatter myself," said the Parisian, laying the box on the table and retreating a few paces with a bow, as if trusting his wares to speak for themselves, "that there is not another firm in France which can pro-

duce such a class of jewel for the same price."

"Yes, yes," said George hastily, with a shrewd guess that to see these sparkling ornaments hidden away again in the little box and carried off without leaving her so much as a single gem to remember them by, would break Nouna's heart. "But they are only sham jewels, Monsieur Ben Hassan, and a lady who has had diamonds of her own could not condescend to wear these."

Nouna, who was leaning over the table, fingering the ornaments delicately, and considering them with the intelligent interest of a connoisseur, glanced up at her husband with a twinkle of demure humour in her eyes, and instantly returned to her amusement with condescension so infinite that it was not to be distinguished from the most extravagant admiration. The astute Ben Hassan saw the look, and bowed again with great humility.

"Monsieur, it is true an imitation is but a poor thing when you know it is an imitation," he said with shoulders raised and hands

outstretched in modest pleading. "But I appeal to Madame, who is evidently a judge, if she would have known these stones from real ones?"

Nouna hesitated, then quietly picked out a pair of diamond solitaire earrings, and held them out under the lamp in her little pink palm.

"I should not have known these from real ones," she said doubtfully, and she looked up with an inquiring glance into the Parisian's face.

Ben Hassan drew himself up with much satisfaction.

"You hear, Monsieur," he said proudly, "Madame would not have known these earrings from real diamonds, and the cost of the pair is only ten francs!"

"Ten francs!" echoed Nouna with incredulous delight.

And as she turned to her husband with a low murmur, "Oh, George!" the paymaster saw that he was doomed. Without further show of resistance he paid the ten francs, and signed to the bowing, smirking Ben

Hassan to pack up his traps and take himself off, which the Parisian did, departing with a torrent of high-flown thanks for their patronage and with every appearance of being highly satisfied with the transaction. So contented did he seem indeed, that so soon as the door closed behind him, and Nouna rushed into the bedroom to try on her purchase, George instinctively took stock of all the portable property which had been within the lively Ben Hassan's reach, to make sure that his ostensible occupation had not been a cover for a predatory one. He had scarcely reassured himself on this point when Nouna rushed in like a radiant little fire-fly, her new ornaments twinkling in her ears, her eyes dancing with mysterious excitement, her dress changed from a simple muslin to a ball-dress of yellow gauzy material in honour of her brilliant bargain. She flitted up to him almost breathlessly, and pulled his head down to her level that she might whisper into his ear a communication which appeared to be of vital importance.

"Do you think," she suggested solemnly,

"that he could have made a mistake, and that they are *real?*"

George laughed, and said No, he did not think it at all likely ; whereupon she was silent for a little while, and then began again in the same tone, but with much hesitation.

"You know, George, he told me that day we went to his bazaar, that he had some real diamonds in his stock, and said that, that——"

"Well, that what?" asked her husband, keeping his voice at a gently subdued pitch, with an intuitive feeling that a confession was coming.

"That if I would call in—some day—by myself—he would show them to me."

"By yourself!" cried George, all his blood on fire in a moment.

Nouna seemed at once to become a mere terror-struck heap, and her husband saw his fatal mistake.

"Did you go? Did you ever go?" he asked in the softest tones he could produce. But for a few minutes she was too much frightened even to speak, except for a muttered,

"No, no, no," as she shook and shivered. When at last by patient gentleness he had mastered her fear, he extracted from her, little by little, the avowal that she had met Ben Hassan one day outside the door of the house where he lived as she was returning home from her marketing, and that he had persuaded her to go up-stairs and see some diamonds he had just received. At the door, however, Nouna declared that she had been frightened by hearing another man's voice inside, and had refused to go in, and that Ben Hassan had brought out some earrings to show her, and had declared that if she would like to take a pair he would be satisfied with only a small payment to start with, and she could pay off the rest in instalments at her convenience.

"But I was frightened, and would not, and I tossed his hand up with the diamonds, and they fell on the floor and on the stairs, and I ran down and left him, and have never seen him since until this evening," finished Nouna, hurrying to the end of her confession. "And I know it was wrong to go up, but I didn't

go in. And now I have done all I could by telling you everything. And you can take the earrings back if you like, only don't be angry with me, because I can't bear it."

She burst out crying hysterically, and it was some time before she was calm enough for her husband to be able to ask her one more question. Did she know the voice of the man she heard talking inside the bazaar? At first she professed she did not, but presently she acknowledged, when asked whether it was like the voice of Rahas, that she thought it was. Then George was very sweet to her, and said she mustn't trouble herself any more about the matter, that she was a very good dear girl to tell him everything, and that it would have been better still if she had told him at first; that she must give up the earrings, as it was evident the man was a treacherous beast who might get them into trouble. He added that she was tired, and must go to bed, and fall asleep as fast as she could, and dream of the real jewels she should have some day if she continued to be the sweet and

good little wife she now was. And so, amidst tears from the wife and consoling kisses, the little shining ear-studs were taken out, and George having become by this time a promising lady's-maid, brushed out her curls for her, and tucked her up in bed, as composedly as if nothing in the world had happened to disturb the calm course of their daily life.

But no sooner was his wife thus disposed of than George, saying he must write a letter and take it to the post, went out of the bedroom, closed the door, and after waiting just long enough, as he thought, to make Nouna think, if she was listening, that he had written a letter, he went out and down the stairs. But Nouna had too much native subtlety herself to be easily tricked. As soon as she heard the outer door of the flat close, she leapt out of bed, muffled herself up in a wrapper, and stepped out on to the balcony. She could see that there were lights in the rooms occupied by the Oriental Bazaar, and that the shadows of men passed and repassed quickly on the inner side of

the striped blinds. Leaning over the iron railing, she watched in much excitement for her husband's appearance in the street below. In a very few minutes she heard the wicket-gate in the *porte cochére* open, saw George cross the street, and enter the house where Ben Hassan was established. She could have cried out to him from where she stood, frozen by a great terror lest these men, whom he had gone to punish, should be too strong for him and should do him harm. But then, would they dare, would they be able, even if they dared, to hurt him, the king of men ? Little by little the seed sown by patient kindness, by conscientious effort, was moving in the earth and beginning to show itself alive. George was not now merely the handsomest, straightest, gentlest of voice among the men she knew, he was also the one person who never did wrong, who if he was angry proved in the end to have what she acknowledged to be a just cause at the bottom of his anger, whose rather surprising notions of what one ought and ought not to do were

at least simple when one came to know him well; and whose opinion was now beginning to have so much weight with her that this evening it had even urged her in the strangest way to break through her habits and make an uncomfortable confession of her own accord. So she reasoned, arguing with herself as he crossed the road whether or not she should try from the height of the fourth floor to attract his attention. It would not be difficult, she felt. The influence she was secure in possessing over him would make him stop and look up at a call of her voice such as would scarcely be heard by the neighbours in the adjoining flats. Suddenly she drew herself erect, a thrill of passionate pride vibrating through her heart, and she laughed aloud and stretched her little hands to the dark sky.

"He does not need my help, for he is one of God's own sons," she whispered, and looking up steadily into the eye of night she waited, with heart beating violently, but with head erect in valiant confidence.

He had to get up those long flights of

stairs, but he would not be long, she knew. She counted the steps he would take, picturing him with grave, earnest face, wearing that look which, when she had done something of which he disapproved, made her want to slide along against the wall with her head turned away from him. The *entresol*, first floor, second floor; surely by this time he must be at the third. She clenched her fingers till the nails made red marks in her soft palms, and strained her eyes in keen staring at the striped blinds. The moving shadows behind them had disappeared. Ben Hassan and Rahas—if it was he—had gone to the door when the sharp ring came at the bell. Nouna held her breath. Surely, surely, she heard sounds from the rooms; yes, yes, a noise of something overturned, and then the lights were put out. The moment after, one of the windows was burst open with a crash, and two people, whose figures she could only see dimly in the darkness, sprang quickly, the one after the other, out on to the balcony, climbed over on to that of the next house, and disappeared

through one of the windows. Then there was silence for a time which seemed long to her, and she saw a dim light reappear in the windows of the Oriental Bazaar. She guessed that it was her husband, searching; in a few minutes the light moved and disappeared. She watched until she saw him reappear in the street below, then she went back into her room, and crept into bed again. When he came softly into the room, holding a candle he had lit in the next room, he crept up to the bedside and shaded the flame to look at her. As he did so, her face quivered, and he touched her forehead lightly with his fingers. The muscles of her mouth instinctively relaxed, and by the thrill that ran through her frame and communicated itself to his he knew that she was awake.

"You are cold, dearest," he whispered.

She sprang up, wide awake, full of life and love, with the bright blood rushing up into her cheeks, and tender, passion-dark eyes,

"No, no, not now, not now," she cried incoherently, as she threw her arms about him. "I was cold when I thought you were

going to face those wicked men, all through my foolishness. But now you are safe I am warm, warm, and listen, George, I am always going to be good and tell you everything, so that you may never get into danger through me any more."

But George was frightened, for her feet were cold as marble, and her lips hot and parched, and he sat up a long time beside her, afraid lest her imprudence should have brought on a fever. Next morning she insisted against his will on getting up. She did not feel well and was very fanciful, astonishing him by the announcement that she wanted to go to church. The day being Sunday, the Oriental Bazaar was closed, and there was nothing for George to do but to gratify her desire. He wished, as in duty bound, to take her to the English church; but Nouna was not particular to a creed, and she had set her heart on going to the Madeleine. So, with some scruples of conscience, he took her to High Mass; and as she remained perfectly quiet and attentive during the entire service, he comforted himself with

the reflection that, as what he had been taught to call the "errors of Rome" were matters of the deepest ignorance and indifference to her, it was hardly an ethical mistake to let her see religion in an attractive light. When they came out he asked her rather curiously what she thought of it.

"Oh, I liked it very, very much; I shouldn't mind going to church there every day," she answered with enthusiasm.

"Why," said George, "the service isn't much more beautiful than that at St. ——'s," and he named an English ritualistic church to which he had twice taken her in London.

"There is a difference," she said thoughtfully.

"Well, what is it?"

Nouna considered a moment. "You know those friends of yours that you took me to see acting in a piece at Saint George's Hall?"

"Yes; well?"

"And then I saw the same piece acted at the Court Theatre just before we left London?"

"Yes."

"Well, the difference is just like that."

George laughed. "I've heard people say

something like that before, Nouna."

"Isn't it right, then ?"

"I don't know, dear."

"George, may I be a Roman Catholic if I like ?"

"No, Nouna."

"Why not ?"

"You musn't choose a religion in a hurry, any more than you may a husband. In both cases, one ought to be enough for a lifetime ; and if you once begin to change your mind about either, you never know when to stop."

"But I had my choice of a husband, and I didn't of a religion ; I had to take what was given me."

"You would never do for a Catholic, Nouna. They have to confess all their sins, even very little ones that you think nothing of."

"Well, that's what you're always wanting me to do."

"See then. You shall go to Mass every Sunday and then confess your sins to me, and you will be the very best of Catholics."

"But, George, George," she began, almost in a whisper, holding his arm tighter, and

looking away over the Place de la Concorde, which they were now crossing, to the trees of the Tuileries, "there are some things—not sins—that one doesn't—like—to tell—I don't know why—but they make one think of so many things—that all seem new—and make one feel—like a different person. I suppose a man—never feels like that, but I'm a woman—quite a woman—now, George."

They walked on without speaking after that, till they got among the trees; then both stopped and looked at each other—shy, for that little whispered suggestion made each appear to the other in a new and sanctified light. The influence of the solemn and impressive Church rites was upon them still, and the bright sun was playing upon their earnest faces through a moving trellis-work of leaves. They had come to a moment which was to be the sweetest in all their lives but one; a moment of perfect confidence, perfect happiness, perfect hope. So they stood quite silently in an ecstasy of contented love, each reading beautiful meanings in the other's steadfast eyes, each seeing

and worshipping, in this moment of exalted human feeling, what was best and most worshipful in the other. They felt so strong, so radiant, as they walked home, she leaning upon him and not talking at all, that every evil which had been a burden yesterday and would be a burden to-morrow, became a mere shadow slinking into corners and dwindling into insignificance before the flood of sunshine in their hearts. Chloris White, Rahas, Ben Hassan, and the odious Gurton were mere names to George that day, and even when with the following morning the drudgery and petty annoyances of workaday life began again, he carried in his heart such a spring of sweet human happiness that he received the snubs of his chief as cheerfully as if they had been compliments, and bore with fortitude the discovery that Monsieur Ben Hassan had "gone away for a few days on business," leaving his premises in the charge of a stolid boy of thirteen or so, who knew nothing definite about his employer's movements. George therefore kept the earrings in his possession and waited for

some claim to be made. It came at the end of a week in the shape of a bill for twelve hundred and fifty francs, ten of which had been paid on account, for a pair of diamond ear-studs supplied to Monsieur Lauriston. George sent back the ear-studs by registered post with a letter threatening Ben Hassan with the police court. In a few days he got back the ear-studs from the post-office, as the person Ben Hassan was not to be found at the address given. George took no further steps until he was summoned before the Civil Tribunal, where he appeared in the full belief that he had only to relate the facts of the case to confound Ben Hassan and lay him open to the charge of perjury. To his great astonishment and indignation, however, Ben Hassan solemnly swore that he had sold the diamonds as real stones, and calling upon George to produce them, challenged any one in the court to assert that it was possible to suppose they could be bought for ten francs. Could the Englishman's wife assert that she did not know them to be real? George had not dared to bring

his wife into court, fearing the effects of the excitement upon her. He weakened his case by asserting emphatically that Ben Hassan was in the pay of a man who wished to ruin him: for he had no proofs to bring forward, and the foreigner's halting French in which he made the accusation compared so unfavourably with the torrent of eloquence with which the artful Parisian refuted it, that, on Ben Hassan's refusing to take back the jewels, the magistrate ordered the Englishman to pay the amount claimed, in monthly instalments of five hundred francs.

With the stolid resistance to unpleasant facts characteristic of his nation, George treated this decision with utter contempt, and indeed believed that Ben Hassan would not dare to push the case further. But on arriving home one rainy day early in the following month, he found his apartments occupied by two *huissiers*, who were busily employed in dragging out into the hall poor Nouna's trunks and such furniture as they had bought themselves, which the landlady, anxious to save her own things, was pointing

out to them. Nouna, deathly white and shaking from head to foot, was crouching on the sofa, drawing her breath heavily, and watching them with bright and burning eyes. Fear of what the consequences of this scene might be to her sobered George in his first fierce outburst of indignation. She had hardly moved when he came in, only glancing up at him in shame and terror at what she knew to be the result of her own indiscretion. He went up to the sofa and reassured her by the kind, firm, protecting pressure of his hand upon her head, while he asked the men by what authority they were acting. They showed him their warrant; nothing could be more correct. He asked them whether they would desist from their work and remain in the hall outside for half an hour, while he went to a friend to try to raise the money. The men consented at once, and retired while George, soothing his agitated wife as well as he could, carried her into the next room, laid her on the bed, and covering her with a rug, told her not to worry herself, as it would be all right in

half an hour, when he would be back again with her, and the men would go away satisfied.

With his hand on the door he looked back yearningly. She was quieter now, but as she leaned on her elbows and watched him with feverish eyes, it seemed to him that her gaze was wandering and unintelligent, and that the real matter-of-fact trouble which was sending him on his unpleasant errand had melted in her excited mind to a dim and horrible dread.

"George, don't go, don't go!" rang in his ears as he went down the stairs and out of the house.

Poor George felt that he had never in his life had anything quite so distasteful to do as the task he had before him now of asking a favour of Mr. Gurton. But there was no help for it, and so he put the best face he could upon the matter, got to the bank, where his chief was, he knew, still at this hour to be found, and knocked at the door of his private room.

"Come in," called out the well-known husky voice.

Mr. Gurton was reading a letter. His face was flushed and his eyes were dull,

but he had as much command of himself as usual.

"Oh, it's you, is it? What do you want?" he asked with the extra shade of surliness which he used towards the people he did not like.

"Yes, sir," said George. "I am sorry to disturb you after office hours, but it is upon a matter of so much importance to me that I hope you will excuse my coming to you."

"Well, what is it? Be quick."

The words, the appeal, stuck in the young man's throat; but out they must come.

"I am in pressing difficulties, sir; I can't explain to you how now, but it was through no fault of mine. Just now when I went home I found a couple of men seizing my wife's things. She is in a delicate state of health, and I am afraid of the shock for her. Will you be so kind as to advance me twenty pounds of my salary? I will write to my friends in England to-night, and I shall have the money next week, and will return it to you at once, if you please. It

is a very difficult thing for me to ask, but I hope you won't refuse me."

He hurried out the words, not daring to look at Mr. Gurton, who had risen from his chair and walked over to the fire-place with a tread which in its pompous heaviness told George before he looked up that he had failed. There was a slight pause when he finished speaking, Mr. Gurton rattling his watch-chain and clearing his throat. George raised his eyes, and saw that his chief's bloated face expressed nothing but complacent satisfaction. Then the devil woke in the lad with such a hungry fury that he turned hastily to the door, afraid of himself. Mr. Gurton, unluckily, could not resist a little play with his fish, and he called him back. George hesitated, and at last turned slowly. Mr. Gurton paused again to find some particularly offensive form of expression, for he thought he saw his opportunity, by insulting the young fellow past endurance, to force him to resign his post, and so make room for his own reputed nephew. He had been put in possession, too, of a damaging fact against George,

and here was the occasion made to his hand, to use it.

"I'm sorry for this little misfortune, Lauriston, deuced sorry; not only because it is quite beyond my powers to assist you, but because, you see, it's so particularly bad for a House that's just starting, for anything disreputable to be known about its *employés*."

"Disreputable!" echoed George in a low voice, starting erect. "You have no right to use such a word without knowing the facts, Mr. Gurton."

"Oh, I know all about the facts, and so does everybody," said Mr. Gurton with confidential familiarity. "You've got an extravagant little madam for your wife, and somebody of course must pay the piper."

George turned again to leave the room. Mr. Gurton, who was a big, muscular man of six feet two, with two strides reached the door first, admitted a lad with despatches who was waiting outside, and held the door close as he continued:

"You must listen, sir, to what I have to say. You were received in this House simply

because we were informed that you were highly connected, and that your social position would be an advantage to the firm. What follows? You go nowhere, you know nobody; you are seen in omnibuses, on penny steamers, with a little oddly-dressed girl—"

"Take care; you are speaking of my wife," said George, in a low tremulous voice which, with his bowed head, gave an utterly wrong impression that he was cowed.

Mr. Gurton put his hands in his pockets.

"Well, sir, and if you chose to marry a courtesan's daughter whom you picked up in the slums—it is——"

Like a wild beast suddenly loosed George had him by the throat, and with hands to which his mad anger gave a grip of steel, he swayed the man's huge frame once forward and flung him back with all his force. Gasping, choking, without time to cry out, Mr. Gurton staggered backwards, his head struck against the corner of an iron safe that stood behind him, and he fell heavily to the floor. Lauriston left the frightened errand-boy to pick him up, and rushed out of the room. He

had suddenly remembered that there was one more chance; a fellow-clerk who was pretty well off lodged in the Rue Saint Honoré. He made his way in that direction, through the still heavily-falling rain, without another thought of the man he had just left, except a savage wish that he had not humiliated himself by applying to the cur.

But Mr. Gurton remained on the floor of his private room, and neither spoke nor moved.

CHAPTER V.

In the excitement of a battle, when each man deals blows for his life, maddened by the clash of sabres, the roar of cannon, fierce cries, and ghastly sights, he gives and receives wounds of which he takes no account, absorbed in the struggle to beat the enemy back; so George, fighting for something dearer than his own safety, forgot his humiliation at Mr. Gurton's hands, forgot his own outburst of passion and the rash act which followed, and still thought of nothing but Nouna's wild, terror-struck face, and of the next effort he should make to remove the cause of her fear. The fellow-clerk, to whom he was now going to apply, was going out of town for the night; if he should have started already, there would be nothing to do but to telegraph to Lord

Florencecourt and, while waiting for the help he would be sure to send immediately, to let the *huissiers* carry off what they would as security. This was a terrible contingency, on account of the shock it might give to Nouna; it had to be faced, however, for, on arriving at the lodgings of his fellow-clerk, George learned that he had been gone half an hour.

It was not until his last hope of getting immediate help had thus disappeared that George, returning quickly towards his home, remembered what had happened in the office, and realised that by an assault upon his chief, which Mr. Gurton would probably describe as unprovoked, he had lost his situation, and perhaps got himself into a worse scrape still, for he had not waited to find out whether Mr. Gurton had been injured by the fall. George thought he would call at the bank and make inquiries, but on arriving at the corner of the street in which the building stood, he saw that a large and excited crowd had already collected, in spite of the rain, about the doors, and that some *gendarmes* were pressing the people back.

"I suppose the boy rushed out, shrieking 'Murder!' and brought up the whole neighbourhood," thought George. "I hope to heaven he's not seriously hurt."

A sudden chill seized him and his heart seemed to become encased in stone. When a heavy man falls, striking his head on the way to the ground—oh, but nonsense, he should have seen, have known what he had done; he should have realised—What? George left a blank there which he could not fill. The possibility suggested by the sight of that swaying, excited mob, thronging, gesticulating fifty yards in front of him, with morbidly eager faces all upturned towards the windows of the first floor, where the bank was established, was too ghastly, too awful. He tried to laugh at himself for entertaining an idea so fanciful, so ridiculous, but the crowd fascinated him ; he could not turn away without —Ah, yes, by going nearer, by joining the stream of people that was still flowing rapidly in that direction, he might learn what sort of a story they had got hold of. The murmurs grew louder as he got deeper and deeper in

the throng, until, when he was well wedged in a feverishly eager phalanx of horror-mongers against whom the few *gendarmes* present were altogether powerless, his curiosity was satisfied to the full, for the story bandied from mouth to mouth was very definite indeed. A foreigner — English or German, it was not certain which, had had a quarrel with his employer, some said about a woman, some said about money, and had murdered him and escaped. Every version of the tale, however they might differ as to other details, contained the two last items—the murder and the escape of the murderer. George stayed deliberately, looked mechanically up at the windows with the rest of the crowd, and gathering in every different turn of the story, with strained keenness of hearing, hoping desperately to hear some one, brighter-witted and better-informed than the rest, contradict the spreading report and mock at the exaggerations of the herd. The moments dragged on; they were expecting a force of *gendarmes*, and the excitement increased. George, unable to move in the dense mass, was in a state of frenzied defiance of the

crowd's surmises, when a quick turn of every head to the left, and hoarse cry "*Les voilà, les voilà*," told him that the police were coming, and the next instant he was being borne off, a helpless unit in the surging crowd as it retreated before the advancing *gendarmes*. Struggling to work his way out of the crush of people when free movement became possible, George stumbled against one of the *gendarmes* who had been waiting for assistance to disperse the mob. He was a slim man, scarcely of middle height, and it was he, and not the stalwart young Englishman, who suffered in the collision, staggering a step or two with an oath. But George shrank back with a great shock. If that ugly rumour should have any touch of truth, then his relation to the little slim man was already that of the hare to the hound, and the start would not be long delayed.

He was free from the crowd now, and was hurrying home sick at heart and giddy of brain, trying to realise the possibility he could no longer shirk. If Mr. Gurton were dead, he—George Lauriston—was a murderer.

That would be quite clear to any judge and jury; George saw that, with the apparently passionless clearness with which one vivid idea can strike the mind in a state of white-hot excitement. He felt no shock at the act, but only at the consequences, not as they affected himself, but as they touched Nouna. George was not the man to waste emotion over the exit from the world of a man who, if he had had fifty more years of life, would only have used them to add to his record of evil; he had certainly never wished or intended to send him out of it, but, always excepting those ugly consequences, he as certainly did not wish him back. The whole matter presented itself to him only in one light: if the hideous rumour were true, he must leave his wife; what then would become of her? It was to him as if his very heart was pierced and quivering under the point of this torturing thought. He was not troubled by any imaginings of what might be his own fate; his whole soul being merely a storehouse for his devotion to his wife, as his body was a shield to protect and a tool

to work for her, there would be nothing left to him worth a man's thought if she were taken away. Taken away ! Taken away ! The very words as they passed through his brain turned him coward ; the clank of his own boots on the stones of the street frightened him, and he turned round with the starting eyes and parted lips of the fugitive, to make sure that he was not already pursued, that before he could see his wife's face again he would not be caught.

He was wet from head to foot and trembling like a leaf by the time he got inside the gate-way of the house. Everything was quiet ; as he glanced at the wife of the *concierge*, sewing behind the glass door of her little room, at the children playing in the yard, at the cat curled up on the stairs, he rebuked himself for his folly in taking a wild mob-rumour for a truth, and comforted by the homely, every-day aspect the house seemed to wear, he ran up the stairs and let himself into the top flat with a lightening heart. At any rate he was sure of one thing : if the worst came to the worst, they could

not take him now without one more long look at his darling. In the terrible, searing excitement of the last hour, all George's habitual self-control had given way, and the great passion of his life, which was always burning steadily in the depths of his heart, leapt up in towers of flame, showing luridly every weak spot in his nature. Like the sailor who bursts open the spirit-stores when the ship is past saving, George sprang across the sitting-room with a fierce yearning for his wife's lips, with words more eloquent, caresses more tender, than any he had ever yet showered upon her, ready for one last interview which was to sum up all the happiness they had enjoyed together, to stamp upon her heart and mind, once and for ever, the memory of the man who had held her as the jewel of his soul, who set no value on his own life without her.

He opened the bedroom door with clammy, trembling hands. Was he blinded by the rushing blood in his brain, or dazed by the sudden change from the lamp-light in the hall to the murky dimness of the fading

daylight? Or was Nouna really not there? He crossed the floor to the bed, calling to her hoarsely by name, and hunting with his hands over every inch of the tumbled quilt where she had lain that afternoon. He went out on to the balcony, walking from end to end of it with his hand along the wet and slippery railing, feeling for her all the way, as if unable to trust to the senses of sight and sound. Then he returned to the sitting-room, and still groping in the dusk, gave forth a loud cry that made the roof ring:

"Nouna! Nouna!"

The door opened slowly; but as he rushed towards it he met only Madame Barbier, the landlady, who, scared and shivering, tried to retreat. But George caught her by the wrists and forced her to answer him.

"Where is my wife?"

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur, don't you know? Have you missed her? Don't look like that, or I cannot, I will not answer you, monsieur; you frighten me; it is not my fault, I have done nothing, nothing at all."

George put his hand to his head with a

muttered curse on the woman's torturing idiotcy, and then forced himself to speak to her calmly.

"My dear madame, surely you can see I don't want to frighten you. But for God's sake speak out."

Slowly, hesitatingly, paralysed by a sudden fear that the news she had would prove even more disquieting than suspense, she spoke.

"When you were gone, monsieur, and the *huissiers* were still here"—George started; he had forgotten the *huissiers*, and their disappearance had not troubled him—"a gentleman called, monsieur, saying he was a friend of yours, and he asked for you; and when I said you were out he said he would see madame. She came out to see him, monsieur, and shrieked when she met him; I know, monsieur, because I followed her into the room after helping her to dress, and she told me to stay."

George held himself as still as stone, afraid of stopping the recital.

"A dark-skinned man," he said, not questioningly.

"Yes, monsieur. Madame wished to retire, but he would not allow it. I gathered that he said the mother of madame was waiting to see her, and that you, monsieur, were with her, and that she had sent money to get monsieur and madame out of their little difficulty. So he paid the men and got a receipt from them, and they left. And madame put on her things and went away with him in a *fiacre*. And I am sure, monsieur, that if I had supposed you would have any objection——"

George let her hand drop.

"When did they go?" he asked in a strangled whisper.

"Not long after you, monsieur. I am sure I thought every moment that you would be back together. But, ah! monsieur is ill; Can I not assist you? Some *eau de vie*——"

George had reeled into a chair and was breathing heavily. This last shock brought no pang; something began clicking and whirring in his head, and he thought he felt a hard, cold substance pressing closer and closer to his neck till he could not breathe,

but began to choke and to gurgle, tearing with both hands at his throat to get the tightening grip away.

"Ah, the knife! the knife!" he burst out hoarsely, as he staggered up on to his feet with starting eyes and labouring breath. "Take her away! take her away! Don't let her see me!"

And he fell to the floor in a fit, just as a loud knocking began on the outer door of the flat.

When he came to himself he was in the tender hands of the police. They treated him very civilly, however, told him they could wait while he changed his clothes, which had been soaked through and through by the heavy rain, and caused George, who was too much exhausted in mind and body to feel even his uncertainty about his wife except as a dull pain, to think kindly of the French allowance for "extenuating circumstances." He was quite broken down, and, regardless of the shivering fits which seized him in rapid succession, was ready to go with them at once, only asking on what charge he was

arrested. On learning that it was for murderous assault, he seemed scarcely enough master of himself to feel relieved that it was no worse; and when they added that it might be changed to a graver one if the injured man, who had been taken to a hospital, should die before the trial, George merely nodded without any sign of vivid interest. Indeed, if he had had complete command of his feelings and his wits, he would not have cared two straws whether Mr. Gurton lived or died. The sentence George had incurred would certainly at the best be a term of imprisonment, at the end of which, whether the period were long or short, Nouna would be as effectually lost to him as if he were already dead.

George Lauriston was of the highly nervous, imaginative temperament to which ambition, hope, devotion are as the springs of life; when these were stopped or dried up, he became at once the withered husk of a man, a helpless log, not chafing at his confinement, not resigning himself to it, but living through the dull days like a brute,

without emotion, almost without thought, weighed down by a leaden depression which threatened to end in the most fearful of all madness—a haunted melancholy. He learned without interest on the second day after his arrest that Mr. Gurton was dead. His formal appearance before the magistrate did him an unrecognised good, by rousing him out of his torpor into a strong sense of shame which bit into his very bones. To appear before a crowd, among whom were some of his Paris acquaintances, a prisoner, a social wreck, with every hope blighted, every honest ambition killed, was an ordeal for which he had to summon all his shaken manliness for one last gallant effort to show a stubborn face to fate. There was a worse experience before him. When he was brought into court to be formally committed for trial, the first faces he saw were those of Dicky Wood and Clarence Massey, the latter of whom wept like a child in open court, and was threatened with ejection for his repeated offers of bail to the extent of every penny he possessed. Lord Florencecourt was not

present. It gave George a shock to hear that the charge against him was murder; the presence of his old comrades seemed to emphasise the gravity of the case, which he realised for the first time since his arrest. When asked if he had anything to say, he answered: "I am not guilty. I reserve my defence," and remained stoically erect and grave while he was formally committed for trial and removed from the court.

On the following day, however, he received two visits; the first was from a well-known Parisian barrister, who had been retained for his defence by Clarence Massey, and had come to receive his client's instructions. The second was from Ella Millard, who was paler, thinner, plainer than ever, and who trembled from head to foot as her hand touched his.

"Ella, my dear girl, you should not have come," said he, more distressed by her grief than by his own plight; "I can't understand how Sir Henry and Lady Millard allowed you to come."

"They didn't allow me; I just came,"

answered Ella in a shaking voice, with a little Americanism she had caught from her mother. "And I've given Uncle Horace such a talking-to as he never had before, even from my aunt. I only heard about it yesterday; they kept the papers from us; but I've made up for lost time since."

She was neither tender nor gentle; perhaps she could not trust herself to be either. Her eyes wandered quickly from one object to another, never resting upon his for two seconds at a time; upon her face there was a fixed scared look, as if her muscles had been frozen at the moment of some fearful shock. She spoke very rapidly, and scarcely allowed him a chance of answer or comment.

"It is very sweet and kind of —" he began, when she started off again.

"Oh, no, I haven't been sweet at all; I never am, you know. First I scolded papa and mamma for not letting us know; then, as I told you, I went for Uncle Horace; and now I've come to finish by an attack upon you. You have been ungrateful and foolish

towards us, George ; you know we all love——"

Her voice trembled, and she stopped. As for George, the sudden flood of warm sympathy and friendship was too much for him. He took her hand in a vehement grasp, and turned his back upon her.

"And now," she continued briskly, though her fingers twitched in the clasp of his, "we musn't waste time. I didn't come to make a fool of myself, but to see if there wasn't something I could do for you. Where is Nouna, George ?"

He turned round quickly, and looking straight into her eyes, saw how well she read his heart, and pressed her hands against his breast with passionate gratitude. She drew them hastily away.

"Well, well, tell me what you know, or what you want to know," she cried, stamping her foot impatiently. "We've heard all sorts of stories already, of course."

"What stories ? Yes, yes, tell me, tell me everything."

"Oh, that she ran away from you, and

that was why you quarrelled with the man."

"And what did you think?"

"I said it was nonsense. People always think that a little lively woman who talks fast and has playful ways must be a perfect fool, but I told them Nouna had quite sense enough to know that she had a good husband, and that if she had already left off loving you it was because you had beaten her—which I did not believe."

"Ella, you're a—a—brick."

"That is to say I'm a hard little thing, made for use, and not for ornament. I see," said she quite saucily. "Well, now tell me what has become of her."

"I—don't—know," said George slowly, with such laboured utterance that Ella grew instantly very serious, guessing the gravity of his fears. "If you—if you could find her—"

Suddenly he gave way, and, dropping on to a chair, hid his face in his hands. There was a little pause, during which Ella stood so motionless that he might have fancied

himself alone; then he felt her hands on his head, not with a hesitating timid touch, but with the firm pressure of fingers that seemed as conductors of the human strength and kindliness that lay in her own heart.

"Tell me all you fancy, or all you fear, George. I wormed everything out of my poor Uncle Horace last night, so you may speak to me quite freely. Do you think she has gone back to her mother?"

The mere mention of this suggestion in a matter-of-fact tone, without any affectation of shrinking, or horror, conveyed a vague sense of comfort. It implied that this was the most likely course to have been taken, and also the most to be desired. He looked up and fixed his eyes on hers with the hopeful confidence of a child towards the stranger who lets it out of the dark cupboard where it has been shut up for punishment.

"She was taken away by a trick, just before I was arrested. The man who did it was a wretch who has been in the pay of—of her mother, and who was in love with her himself. Ella, can you understand?"

She shivered; the look of agony in his eyes was too horrible to be borne. She wrenched her right hand from his and brought it sharply down on his shoulder.

"Look here!" she said earnestly, "you are torturing yourself without cause; I am sure of it. I am a woman, and I can feel what a woman would do. Nouna is sharp and bright, and even cunning upon occasion. She would not be ten minutes in that man's society without knowing that she must be on her guard. I suppose he promised to take her to her mother; then depend upon it she would never let him rest until he had done so."

"Ah, but you don't know all, Ella. Her mother hates me——"

"——quarrelled with you, and threatened all sorts of awful things, I know; Uncle Horace told me. But, George, you silly old George, don't you know that after all she's her *mother*, and do you really believe that when Nouna came to her, flinging her arms about her, worshipping her, and looking upon her as her refuge, her safety—remember that!—that she would, or could, undo all the work of her life,

and use now to make her daughter miserable means which she would not use before to make her, according to *her* notions, happy ?"

George's face grew lighter ; he looked up out of the window and then turned again to the girl.

"Certainly—as you put it—it seems possible—"

"Of course it is possible, probable, and I will stake my word—true. You men are good creatures, but you can't reason. Now I will write direct to the mother——"

"My dear Ella, I don't think you must do that. Ask Lady Mill——"

"Nonsense. Don't be old-maidish. To-morrow you shall hear something—something good, I earnestly believe."

"Ella, you are killing me," said George in a stifled voice. "If you knew—what it is—after these awful days—and nights—to hear——"

"A human voice again ? I know," said she, speaking more hurriedly than ever to hide the breaks that would come in her clear tones. "Only don't trouble, don't worry yourself.

Clarence Massey—bless him !—has been crawling on the ground for me to walk upon him ever since he found I—I—I was coming to—to see you. His grandfather is just dead, and he has come into £4000 a year, and he wants to bribe all the prison officials with annuities to let you escape. We caught the barrister outside when he left you, and when he said they could not bring it in—the worst——" here her voice gave way, "there was not evidence enough, we could both have kissed him, George ; I'm sure we could."

She had talked herself out of breath, and was obliged to stop, panting and agitated through all her hectic liveliness. George himself was speechless and could do nothing but wring her hands, so she went on again after a moment's pause.

"You mustn't expect to get off altogether, I'm afraid. I dare not speak about this much, because it is so dreadful to us all—everybody. But you must keep a good heart, for you have friends as deep as the sea and as firm as the rocks, George ; and as for your little wife, why she shall live among us like

a qu—queen in exile until her lord comes back again to make her ha—happy."

The warder had been clicking the keys outside for some minutes; he now gently opened the door and gave a respectful cough. George seized the girl's hands and pressed upon them kisses that left red marks on the pale flesh before he could let her go.

"God bless you, Ella," he whispered hoarsely, "you have saved my heart from breaking."

The next moment the door shut upon her, but the radiance shed upon the bare walls by the pure sweet woman illumined them still.

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT, and a day, and a night, and a day, and again a night passed during which time George heard nothing more of his ministering angel or her promised comfort. Then on the second day his door opened, and a lady to see him was announced. The few instants which elapsed before she appeared were more intensely exciting to him than the pause before the judge pronounces sentence is to the prisoner. It was not Ella; she would have been in like a sparrow before the announcement was well out of the warder's mouth. His suspense did not last a half-minute. With slow and hesitating steps a woman entered, oddly dressed in garments that were obviously never intended to be worn together; a shabby old grey flannel

dressing-gown with scraps of torn lace trailing along the floor behind her, an opera-cloak of light brown satin embroidered in gold thread bordered with sable-tails and fastened by a brooch of sapphires, a battered black bonnet and a lace veil as thick as a mask, formed a costume so grotesque that at the first moment George failed to recognise in the odd figure the luxurious and once daintily dressed Chloris White. The change in her, when she took off her veil as the warder retreated, was even more striking : it appalled George, who had not had enough experience of women of her class and their dismal vagaries to understand this ghastly but common metamorphosis of the beauty of one day to the hag of the next. He had thought in the glare of the sunlight, that afternoon when he had carried her off to the boat, that the liberal daubing of pink and white and black made her beautiful face hideous: now, as she sat, heedless of her appearance, in the full light of the little barred window, her face as innocent of paint as his own, though not so clean, looked, in its

withered yellowness, with its sunken eyes and vicious furrows, so inexpressibly uncanny and revolting, that he was forced to acknowledge the wisdom of a practice which disguised in some measure the ugly traces of base thoughts and foul deeds. He had seen her first in all the pride of her vogue, of her success in the career she had chosen; now he saw her in the alternate mood of a degradation, a self-abandonment, a wretchedness, which mocked the possessor of treasures which would have made an art-museum rich, and of jewels and furs which now only served, the former to enhance the weird hideousness of her sallow skin, the latter to emphasise the slovenliness of her attire.

She seemed ill at ease and frightened: the daughter of an English gentleman and an Indian princess, her wayward course of life had reduced her native grace and dignity to mere accidents of mood, and a check or a disappointment made her destitute of either. George was horror-struck, and could not speak, but stood waiting for her to explain the object of her visit. From the

moment of her entrance, he had forgotten her connection with Nouna; he was brought back to startled recollection by her first words, which were spoken in a querulous, tearful voice.

"Well, you have sent to ask me where is your wife. It is I who come to ask where is my child?"

"Nouna!" exclaimed George in a low voice. "You do not know where she is?"

"No. You have spoilt her for her mother, you have made her look down upon me, fear me. And what have you done for her yourself? What has she become through you? How have you kept your fine promises to me? You were too proud to take my money; it was too base for your fine fingers to touch; she was to be rich, and honoured, and happy through you! And what happens? What happens, I say?" Her excitement was increasing as she talked, until the low tones he had admired in her voice became shrill and nasal, and the great brown eyes, which had looked languishing and seductive when

she raised and lowered them artfully between thick fringes of long black lashes, now flamed and flashed in her dry, parched skin like fires in a desert. "You fling away all your chances, you go to work as a common clerk, you make her—my daughter, *my* beautiful daughter—live like a dressmaker in two wretched rooms, and then you let her be carried off from you under your very nose, so that she comes back to me ill, miserable, her beauty spoilt, her heart breaking—the wife of a criminal."

In the course of her violent speech this woman had wrung his heart again and again, not by her reproaches, but by the pictures she had called up of Nouna. What had the poor child learnt about her mother? How had she borne it? She had been shocked, disgusted, so he gathered. Poor little thing, poor little thing! And what had she learnt about him? So his thoughts ran in a running commentary, and when Chloris White stopped, moaning to herself in bitter scorn and anger, he had to clear his throat again and again before he could speak.

"Then she is with you?" he said at last huskily.

The woman raised her head in fierce petulance.

"No, no, no, I tell you. She is not with me—she has left me, and I don't know where she has gone."

A great river of pain, mingled with which ran one tiny current of sweet sad pleasure, seemed to rush through the heart of the stricken young husband at the image these words called up before him, of the poor little wife coming for refuge into her mother's home, gathering some inkling of the terrible truth that her idol was not all she had believed, and shrinking as her husband would have had her do, as her mother fancied she would not do, from the luxury that bore a taint, creeping out into the world again, perhaps to come back to Paris alone in search of himself.

"You don't know where she has gone!" he repeated in a softer voice, for he recognised genuine human feeling in the woman's tones.

"No, I tell you."

"When did she leave you?"

"Two days ago. I have hunted for her ever since; I came to Paris to look for her. Then a lady, a Miss Millard, one of Lord Florencecourt's nieces—one of *my* nieces," she added defiantly, "telegraphed to my house in London, and the telegram was forwarded to me here. You wanted to know whether Nouna was with me, she said. She is not with me, she is lost, wandering about in the world by herself, ill, out of her mind, perhaps. Are you satisfied? See what your education has done for her, see the grand result of your virtuous principles. She would have been safe in my house and happy, and could have been as good as she pleased; I never prevented her, I never should have prevented her. But you have touched her with your own infernal cursed coldness and idiotcy, and nothing would please her. During the two days she was with me, it was nothing but: 'When is George coming? Do you think George will come by the next train?' You haven't even made her good either, for

when I offered to take her to church, she wouldn't go with me, but let me go alone. You have spoilt her life, you have killed her."

She burst into a passion of tears. George paid no attention to her, but walked up and down, torturing himself by imagining what could have become of his wife, and wondering when Ella would come again, that he might consult the bright-brained girl as to the next step to take to find her. He was deeply anxious to know all that had passed between Nouna and her mother and Rahas, but he almost despaired of learning anything from the hysterical creature before him. Gradually, however, Chloris White seemed to wake to the fact that she was being ignored, and she tried to recover some calm and a semblance of dignity.

"What have you to say for yourself? Don't you understand what you have to answer for?" she asked with asperity.

George stopped short in his walk up and down the narrow space at his command, and looked at her with a troubled face, but in his voice there was a quiet and biting contempt as he replied—

"I have to answer for having fostered what was best in her nature till she was strong enough to resist all the temptations your wicked folly could suggest, that's all."

And he began to walk up and down again. Chloris White sprang from her chair and stopped him by a violent grip of his arm.

"How dare you say such things to me, you, who are the cause of it all!"

George removed her hand from his arm and looked down at her sternly.

"Madam, you are talking nonsense," he said; "your daughter was perfectly happy with me; you set a mischievous rascal to work to get us into difficulties, to entice her away from me; and it is through no fault of yours that the scoundrel didn't succeed in ruining her as he has done me. When you came in here just now you seemed human enough to be ashamed of yourself, and I said nothing to you. Now that you have overcome your shame, I have overcome my forbearance, and I tell you plainly you are the most corrupt, depraved, and vile creature I ever met, and it would be better for Nouna

to take shelter in a workhouse than in your home. Now you had better go, I cannot bear the sight of you."

The contemptuous brutality with which he shot these rough words at her and then turned away proved a far more effective mode of treatment than the courteous composure he had shown at the beginning of the interview ; for self-restraint is a quality little understood or practised by women of her class and their companions. She at once became submissive and apologetic, rose and walked meekly towards the door.

"I am sorry I intruded upon you ; I thought you would like to hear what I knew about your wife ; I will go."

George was immediately shocked at his own savagery, and without approaching or looking at her said he had not meant to be rude; his temper was not improved by confinement, and he should be very glad if she would tell him something—anything, only she must tell him nothing but the truth.

"Yes, yes, I will tell you the truth, indeed," she said humbly, clasping her hands with

restless impulsiveness, and recognising, with the shrewdness of long practice in the arts of pleasing men, that to relate bare facts was her best chance with this one. "She came to me five days ago—in the early morning—to my house in London. It was the day after she left you. The person who brought her——"

"Rahas?" interrupted George sharply.

"Yes, Rahas—had told her (I assure you he was not acting by my authority)——"

"Go on, go on."

"Rahas had told her that you had come to me—that I was in Paris, that I was ready to help you (indeed, I should have been, I assure you)."

George moved again brusquely, and Chloris hastened back to the facts.

"He took her to an hotel, but Nouna mistrusted him, and insisted on remaining in the *fiacre* while he went in to see if I was there. When he had gone in she jumped out of the cab, made inquiries of the proprietress, and found I had never been to the hotel at all. (You understand, Mr. Lauriston, that all this was without my sanction?)"

"Perfectly," said George, with the best accent of sincerity he could muster.

"She was going to drive back home when Rahas ran out of the hotel, told her the fact was I was ill in England, was dying to see her, and had sent him to bring her over by a trick, since I knew her husband would not let her come. Nouna was worked upon so much by this, that, as they had driven to the Gare du Nord, and were just in time for the Calais train, she decided on the impulse of the moment to come, but insisted on travelling in the ladies' compartment of the train, and in the ladies' cabin on board, so that he saw very little of her on the journey, until they got to Charing Cross, where she got into a hansom by herself, and refused to come into my house until Sundran went out to reassure her. Apparently, Mr. Lauriston, marriage had not increased her trust in human nature."

"It has taught her to discriminate, madam."

"I was not up. She was taken into my boudoir, and I dressed and went to see her. She was standing just inside the door, waiting; she was flushed, and trembling, and so

weak with fatigue and excitement that she almost fell into my arms. But then—"

Chloris stopped. Something in these vivid memories was keenly painful to her.

"She knew—you were her mother?" said George in a low voice.

Chloris, who had related her story standing so that he could only see her side-face, turned the full gaze of her black eyes upon him defiantly.

"Well, take what pride in it you like, she drew back from my arms, and looked at me, and the colour went out of her face, and left her quite white, with dark rings under her eyes, and she asked, in a weak whisper: 'Are you really my mother?' Perhaps I looked angry and spoke harshly; I thought of you, and how you had poisoned her mind against me, and she ran to the door with a wild, scared face, and cried: 'George! Where is George?' And she glanced round the room like a caged bird, and fell down crying on to the floor. So I left her, for I saw you had taken her from me altogether, and Sundran went to her and made her bathe and rest,

and she wrote out a telegram to you, and fell asleep crying. When I saw her again she was quite meek and subdued, and sat with me very quietly, not talking, but looking at me with wondering, inquiring eyes that haunt me. For I tell you I have loved my child, and it was hard to find that she had no heart left for me. Then I was sorry that I—sorry that she had come; and when I learnt what had happened to you, I was angry, furiously angry with Rahas, and I would not let him come near the house, and I did not know what to do with the child. She could not be happy with me—you had spoilt her for that. I gave her a beautiful dress I had had made, and she said: 'I will wear it when George comes.' She would not meet my friends, and I did not press her; she did just as she liked, and took walks with Sundran instead of driving with me. And on the third morning she was gone. Her bed had not been slept in, and the footman said she had gone out late the night before. She left a note thanking me for being kind, and saying she could not rest till she saw her husband again. Then I

came over here to look for her, for I love her, and I love her no less for her not loving me. I went to the rooms where you stayed, but she had not been there, and all I found of her there was this."

She handed to George two telegrams, both addressed to himself. They had been opened by Chloris. Both were from Nouna. One had been sent from Dover on her journey. It said:

"I have gone to see mamma, who is ill. She will help us. Come at once, or I shall think you are angry."

The second was sent from London, and contained these words:

"Come to me quickly, I am frightened and ill. Start at once. I hear your voice calling to me, and I have not money enough to come."

As George read these words his sight failed him, and a great sob shook his whole frame. Chloris tried to take back the two scraps of flimsy paper, but he thrust them into his breast.

"No, they are mine," he said in a broken voice.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As you like," said she in a hard tone. "After all, I have a better consolation than you have."

George looked at her inquiringly.

"I was born ambitious," she continued, "as the unlucky daughter of a princess had a right to be. I centred my ambition unselfishly on my daughter; you and she frustrated me. Well, I can still be Viscountess Florencecourt —and I will."

George pulled himself together to make a good fight for his old friend. This devil-may-care creature, who was beginning to find the oft-tried excitements fail, was just in the mood to plunge head foremost into the delights of starting a new and sensational scandal. George took care to speak with the greatest calmness.

"I don't think you will, though, when you think about it. You are too clever."

"I am too clever to fail to do so, I flatter myself."

"You are quite clever enough, madam, to convince every separate person you talk to of

the justice of your claim, but with the general public, with society, the bar, the bench, all reason, sympathy, and probably law, would be against you. I don't think you could get a firm of standing to take up your case."

"Don't you?" said Chloris, raising her eyebrows incredulously, while her face assumed an expression of deep cunning. "And what if I assure you that I have prepared for this contingency by *making* a firm of standing ready to my hand?"

George suddenly remembered the utter and rather inexplicable devotion to her interests shown by Messrs. Smith and Angelo, and listened with curiosity as she went on:

"Four years ago a son of old Angelo's went mad about me, and robbed his father to make me handsome presents. The old man was dreadfully cut up. I learnt the facts, and knowing the reputation of the firm was good, I earned the eternal gratitude of the father by throwing over the son, and making restitution to the extent of some four thousand pounds. Do you understand?"

"I see that you have gained a solicitor

devoted to your interests; but I maintain that it would be directly against your interest to put pressure on the Colonel. I know him; I know that he would resist your claim with such influence to back him as even you could not stand against; and I know on the other hand"—George lowered his voice, and spoke with slow significance—"that if you are content to let things remain as they are, he will be quite ready to make *private* redress by making such provision for you, when you choose to ask for it, as even the daughter of a princess would not refuse."

Chloris was interested to the extent of evidently occupying herself with a mental calculation.

"*Ask* for it! I could *claim* it!" she said defiantly.

"But as a claim it would not be allowed."

Chloris shrugged her shoulders, but she was impressed. She knew that her charms had passed their zenith, and a handsome provision for the future was not to be despised. George was satisfied with the impression he had made, and extremely anxious to be rid of her. In

fact they both felt glad that the reappearance of the warder now brought to a close a visit which had been prompted by no very kindly feeling. At the last Chloris seemed to feel this, and she lingered at the door to say, in a voice that had some womanly kindliness and some self-reproach in it:

"I am sorry I came, for I have done you no good. I was thinking of nothing but my child—my disappointment. Forgive me. I am not bad all through, and I thank you for what you have done for her. We can feel for each other now, you and I, different as we are: we have both lost her. If I have had any hand in bringing you here, forgive me, for my life is broken too."

George held out his hand. Not that he believed much in the permanency of the capricious creature's grief, but that it was impossible for him to refuse pardon to any one who asked for it sincerely. She kissed his fingers passionately, to his great discomfiture; for not only had he a Briton's natural objection to demonstrations of this sort, but his clemency towards the woman who had done

her utmost to cause the wreck of his life was only the result of a surface sentiment of pity which thinly covered a very much deeper feeling of disgust and resentment, and when the door closed behind her he shook himself like a dog, with an impulse to get free from the very air which she had breathed.

George had no more visits, except from his advocate, for the next two days; but on the third he received a note from the Colonel, dated from England, and written in a perturbed and rather constrained tone, containing a backward shot at his foolishness in marrying a girl of whom he knew nothing, some sincere condolences and regrets at his situation, and a useful expression of fear that he, the Colonel, was "in for it now." On the whole, the possibility that Chloris White would now turn her attention entirely to him seemed to have swamped Lord Florencecourt's kindliness, and George wrote him the following answer not without some bitter feelings:

"DEAR LORD FLORENCECOURT,

"I thank you very much for the kind

things you say. But as for my marriage, which you deplore as the beginning of the mess I am in, I assure you I am just in the same mind about it as I was at the time when I gave my name to the forlorn little creature whose natural guardians had left her at the mercy of they didn't care who. I don't stand so well in the world now as I did then, but I think I am no worse a man for having loved something better than my ambition, and taught my wife to love something better than her trinkets. I have done my best to secure her nearest male relation from annoyance, and I think I have succeeded; I hope that this circumstance will induce him to make every effort to find her and take care of her, if his instinct does not. I pray you, with the solemn prayer of a man who may be dead to the world, to persuade him to this. If I were satisfied about her, they might do what they liked to me and welcome.

"Yours very sincerely,
"GEORGE LAURISTON."

Within a fortnight of Chloris White's visit George, ill and feverish from neglected cold and reduced to a state of almost imbecile disquietude, not for himself, but for the wife of whose fate no one could, or no one dared to give him tidings, was examined by the judge, according to French law, and brought up for trial. The proceedings produced in him not even a languid appearance of interest; accusation and defence seemed to his worn-out weary brain only a long monotonous buzz of unmeaning words, and when the verdict was pronounced, he did not know whether it was more or less severe than he had expected.

He was acquitted of the charge of wilful murder, but found guilty of homicide, and sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

George repeated the words to himself, trying to realise them. But all he knew was that he was thankful the trial was over.

CHAPTER VII.

It is well for the wounded spirit when the body falls sick in sympathy, and the piercing thoughts become blunted into vague fancies, and the heavy load of doubt and despair falls off with the responsibilities of sane and sound existence.

George Lauriston, who had been unconsciously sickening ever since the day when he was arrested, and, stupefied by misery, had gone off to prison in clothes which had been saturated with the rain, was, on the day after his conviction, too ill to stand; his skin was hot and dry, his eyes were glazed and dull, and his limbs racked with pains. The surgeon, on being sent for to see him, ordered his immediate removal to the hospital, where for three weeks he was laid up with a sharp

attack of rheumatic fever. He recovered very slowly, but as this is a common case with sick prisoners, who not unnaturally prefer the relaxed discipline and better food of the hospital ward to the monotonous life and meagre fare which awaits them on their convalescence, he received no special attention on that account, and as soon as he was declared fit to be removed, he was consigned to Toulon with a batch of other convicts destined, like himself, for work in the dockyards. He was visited in his illness by Ella Millard, but he was unable either to recognise her, or to learn from her lips the painful tidings that every effort to find his wife had proved fruitless. He started on his miserable journey, therefore, without one parting word to cherish during the long months which must elapse before he could see a friend's face again, and knowing nothing of the efforts that were being made on his behalf.

The New World energy which poor little Lady Millard had used only to force herself into the same mould as her husband's less vivacious compatriots, had blossomed out in her youngest daughter to a quality of the

highest order, capable, on occasion, of transforming the plain, unobtrusive girl into something like a heroine. Ella was convinced that the sentence passed upon George Lauriston was unduly severe, and further, that if carried out it would kill him; therefore she put forth all her powers of perseverance and resource in the endeavour to get it mitigated. To her uncle Lord Florencecourt, and her aunt Lady Crediton, both of whom were persons of influence, she did not allow one moment's rest until, through the English ambassador at Paris, she had obtained a hearing of the French Minister of the Interior. In this, however, she did not succeed until the following spring, by which time her poor friend's release by surer means seemed to be drawing near.

Before the winter was more than half through George believed that he was dying. The authorities of the prison thought so too, and out of compassion for the "*bel Anglais*," whose athletic form, distinction of movement and manner, and the old thoroughness and absorption with which he did whatever work he had to do, had gained him the same sort of

reputation among the lowest of mankind that he had formerly held among the highest, they shortened the preliminary term of confinement within the walls, and put him with the workers in the dockyard, in the hope that the open air, nipping and keen as it was in these winter days, might restore the failing vigour of his frame, and check a hacking cough which made even the warders shrug their shoulders and mutter "*pauvre diable!*" as they walked up and down the echoing stone corridors in the frosty nights of the early year.

March had come, with bitter winds and no signs of the winter's breaking, when George Lauriston was sent, as one of a small gang of convicts, to repair a breach in the harbour made during a storm the day before. There was some hard and hazardous work involved, a portion of the structure having been rendered unsafe by the tearing away, by the action of the waves, of the outer piles placed to break their force. Glad of the excitement, however, and of the nearer approach to their kind of the outer world which the walk to

and from the harbour afforded, the gang of convicts, picked out of the smartest and best-conducted men, went to this novel work with more alacrity than usual. The weather was still rough; the waves, of a troubled greenish-brown colour, were crested with white, and the wind drove the drizzling sleet straight from the north.

In spite of the fierce gusts of wind, of the clouds of saturating spray which broke up against the wall of the harbour and fell with a patter and a hiss on to the stone, on the first day that the convicts worked there, a small, slender woman, poorly dressed, who fought the wind with difficulty and caught her breath with deep-drawn, struggling sobs as if the exertion hurt her, crept slowly along the outer side of the slippery pier through the dense sea-showers, until she was within a few feet of the warder who walked, with fixed bayonet, up and down, guarding the convicts on the land side. The warder stopped, and asked her rather brusquely what she wanted.

"Nothing; I only want to get as near as I

can to the sea. It's good for me," she answered fluently, but in a foreigner's French.

And as she looked ill enough for every breath she drew to be already numbered, and fixed her eyes yearningly on the horizon as if no nearer object was of moment to her, he let her stay. But each time that his back was turned on his walk she was up like a hare in spite of her evident weakness, eagerly scanning the workers in their coarse grey uniforms, searching, searching, until at last, at her third scrutiny, she discovered the man she wanted. It was George Lauriston. He was working with a will, pickaxe in hand, his feet now in, now out of the water, his back towards her, his arms rising at regular intervals, as he dealt blow after blow at the solid masonry. She did not cry out as she recognised him; she did not even try to attract his attention; but fell back into her former position and retained it unchanged through two or three turns and returns of the warder up and down. The one glance had intoxicated her; she doubted her own powers of self-

restraint, that gave her the blessed privilege of seeing him, her own husband, in the flesh, after those long dark months of absence when he had come to her only in dreams.

After a little while she noted, sitting crouched under the wall, out of sight of the convicts, that the blows of the pickaxe had ceased. If for a few moments he was resting, he might, if God would be kind, turn this way, see her, meet her gaze with his, give her one short kiss of the eyes that she might carry home and nurse in her memory through the long nights when she lay awake thinking of him. She waited, scarcely drawing breath, till the warder turned again. She had ten full seconds for her venture. Scudding over the great stones like a lapwing she reached the breach again, and looked over. A cry rose from her heart, but she stifled it as, through spray, rain, mist, the wind-driven rain cutting her tender face like stones, the waves shooting up great geysers of white foam close to her, she met the look that through long weeks of illness she had hungered for.

"Nouna!" cried George, with a hoarse

shout that the waves drowned with their thunder.

Finger on lip she sped back in a moment, leaving him dazed, stupefied, half believing, half hoping the figure he had seen was only a vision of his imagination. For could that little pinched, wasted face, in which the great brown eyes stood out weirdly, be the bonny bride whose beauty had seemed to him almost supernatural? He set to work again mechanically, hardly knowing what he did; but when the short day began to draw in, and a veil of inky clouds to bring a shroud-like shadow over the sea, and the warders gave the word to cease work and muster for the march back to the prison, he saw the little weird face again, read the short sad message of unwavering love and weary longing in her great passion-bright eyes, and resisting, with one supreme effort of the old soldierly habit of discipline, the dangerous temptation to risk everything and break the ranks for an embrace, which his failing health told him would certainly be the last, he marched on with the rest, and left her to creep—benumbed with

cold and wet to the skin, but feverishly happy in the knowledge that she had seen him again —back to her home to live on the hope of another such meagre meeting.

The next day was wild, stormy, and bitterly cold, with a driving north-east wind, and intermittent snow-showers. But when the convicts were marched down to the harbour, Nouna was already there, crouching—a small, inert bundle of grey waterproof—under the shelter of a pile of huge stones, watching for her husband's coming with hungry eyes. When the tramp, tramp, upon the flags told her the gang was approaching she peeped out cautiously, and then, afraid lest in her desire to escape the notice of any one but George, she should escape his also, she rose, crept out a few paces from her shelter, and turned her face boldly towards the advancing men. George was in the front rank to-day ; in the morning light, which beat full upon his face, she saw him well, saw a terrible change in him ; even while he, on his side, noted more fully the transformation in the little fairy princess who had taken his whole nature by storm less than a year

ago—from a lovely unthinking child into a sick and desolate woman. How could he think, as he looked at her, that there was anything, but loss in a change which rent his very heart, and moved him as no allurement of her beauty, no wile of her sensuous coquetry, had ever done? In spite of the educational enthusiasm he had spent upon his sixteen-year-old bride, in spite of his genuine anxiety to surround her with elevating and spiritualising influences, it thus happened that when at last the spirit instead of the senses shone out of her yearning eyes, it gave him no gladness, but rather a deep regret, and instead of thanking Heaven for waking the soul he had in vain longed to reach, he cursed his own fate that he had brought about this change in the woman for whom he was at all times ready to die.

He did not pass very near to her, for the little creature was cowed and shy, afraid of bringing some punishment upon him by any sign of intelligence. He tried to speak to her, tried to tell her not to wait there, exposed to the bitter wind and the lightly falling

snow; but his voice was hoarse and broken, nothing escaped his lips but guttural sounds, which did not even reach her ears. So that when, after a couple of hours' work upon the rough stones of the pier, he again came in sight of his wife, crouching in the same place, watching patiently for another brief sight of him, he took, to save her from the risks her fragile frame was running, a resolve, the execution of which cut him like a knife. He went up to the warder and said:

"That is my wife. She will die of cold if she stays. Please speak to her gently."

George saw, as he turned to go back to his work, the poor child's white frightened face as the warder addressed her. Slowly, with one long straining gaze, as if she would draw her loved one into her arms by the passionate force of her yearning eyes, she turned, and George saw her hurry away down the pier as fast as her chilled limbs would let her: and he felt that the little retreating figure which soon became a mere speck against grey sky, grey sea, grey stone, had carried away the last shred of human hope and human

feeling that prison life and failing health had left in his breast.

Next day, which was the last of the work in the harbour, Nouna was not on the pier; but as George took his place with the rest he found, roughly cut with a knife or some other sharp instrument in one of the large stones, the letters filled in with red chalk, these words:

"I have been quite good all the time. Good-bye. N."

It was his wife's last message to him. George knelt down and put his lips upon the stone. He had forgotten that he was not alone, but if he had remembered, it would have made no difference. The waves might wear out next tide the feebly scrawled marks which perhaps no eye but his could decipher, or the words might be read by every man, woman, and child in the town—it was all the same to him now; they were engraved upon his own heart, a complete, a holy answer to every doubt which had ever troubled him, to every aspiration he had ever had for the young life he had bound to his own. Love and

sorrow had sanctified her; there was no danger for his darling now.

The man, on the other hand, had only his worst feelings intensified by misfortune which he could not but look upon as unmerited. George's love for his wife remained as strong as ever, but it was now the one soft spot in a nature rapidly hardening under the influence of a struggle with fortune in which he had been signally worsted. In the long hours of the night, when his cough kept him awake even though he was tired out by a hard day's labour, he brooded over the wrongs he had suffered, until the canker of disappointment ate into his heart and bred there a burning, murderous wish for revenge: not upon the French law which had condemned him, as he maintained, unjustly—that was impersonal, intangible, a windmill to fight; not upon the Colonel, who had faltered in his friendship; not upon Chloris, whose mischievous caprice had set in motion the force which had indirectly destroyed him; but a man's indignant righteous revenge upon the rascal who had tried from his very wedding-day to come

between him and his wife. George began to feel that it was even more for the sake of finding Rahas than of meeting Nouna again that he yearned with a sick man's longing to live until the time of his release, and prayed for strength to drag on an existence which with its hopelessness and its morbid cravings for the savage excitement of vengeance, was an infernal torment which told, by its intensity, on his waning strength.

The prison authorities noticed the change in him, and treated him with what little consideration was possible. The old priest, in particular, stirred by the fact that "number 42" was a heretic into giving him something better than the conventional doses of religious advice which he administered to the devotees of "the true Church," proved a most kind friend to him, and it was with a manner of sincere and warm sympathy that the good father, while paying him his usual visit one day in April, let fall at parting a mysterious whisper about good news and good friends who had not forgotten him. The brooding prisoner hardly heeded him. But next morn-

ing he was brought up before the governor, and a paper was formally read out to him, in which he was informed that the Minister of the Interior, on having brought under his notice the case of the Englishman, George Lauriston, now undergoing a sentence of penal servitude at Toulon, had come to the conclusion that the said sentence was unduly severe, and that, as the evidence went to show that the crime was unpremeditated, and committed under strong provocation, a short term of imprisonment would have been adequate punishment, and that, in view of the fact that the said George Lauriston had been already at Toulon working as a convict for nearly four months, the Minister had decided to remit the remainder of the allotted term of imprisonment. George listened, but he hardly understood; the governor, in a few kindly words, then told him that he was a free man, that he could go back to his friends.

"Friends!" echoed George in a dull voice.

"Come, you cannot deny that you have friends; it is to some of them that you owe the good news you have just received," said

the governor. "I understand they are in the town waiting to meet you. Sir Henry—something I do not recollect, is the name of the gentleman; and the lady——"

A light broke over George's face; he spoke some broken words of thanks in a more human voice.

That evening he was a free man, and was holding, dazed and trembling as with palsy, on one side the hand of Sir Henry Millard, on the other that of his daughter Ella.

CHAPTER VIII.

GEORGE had not known until this meeting with his old friends how much ill-health and confinement had pulled him down. He scarcely dared to look at Ella, for there came a lump in his throat whenever his eyes fell on her brave, steadfast face. Sir Henry's presence was a great relief to them both. The baronet's comments on the situation were so inapposite, and he had such a strong sense that he was rendered ridiculous by this journey to France to chaperon his daughter in her efforts on behalf of another woman's husband, that he gave them something to laugh at when they were only too ready to cry. Ella was as practical as ever.

"What are you going to do?" asked she,

drawing George aside with her usual *brusquerie* when the first greetings were over.

"I am going to find Nouna," said he. "She has been here, and she went away ill a fortnight ago; I have found that out, and that her black servant Sundran was with her. I must start to-night.

"You are too ill for the journey."

"I am too ill to stay here. I have some work to do in England besides."

"What work?"

He did not answer, and there was a pause, during which she considered him attentively.

"George," she said at last in a low voice, "you are changed. You have lost the 'good' look you used to have. The work you speak of is something unworthy of you."

"It must be something very degrading then; you forget I am a——"

She stopped him imperatively.

"You are my ideal of an Englishman, as honest as any and not so stupid as some. If you hadn't been unlucky, I should never have told you so, but now that you know

what a surpassingly lofty opinion I have of you, I expect you to live up to it."

"You must let me be human though."

"That depends. There is a good and bad humanity. What do you want to do?"

"I want to—well—I want to—get at that scoundrel Rahas!"

"You may—on one condition."

"Well?"

"You mustn't lay a hand on him until you have seen Nouna."

George looked at her wonderingly.

"Tell me why you make that condition."

Her answer came at once in a full, deep, steady voice, that betrayed even more than her words did.

"Because I know that the sight of a face one loves and has longed to see can extinguish all hatred and anger, everything but happiness; just as your coming to-night has calmed down all my wicked feelings towards my uncle and towards—your poor little wife. I can forgive you for marrying her now—for the first time."

George was thunderstruck. All the pas-

sionate intensity with which the small, plain girl had loved him and longed for his success in life, had compassionated him and worked to retrieve his errors, blazed in her black eyes and seemed to cast a glow over her sallow face. Men are so much accustomed by reason and experience to associate women's fragility of frame with frivolity of mind, that any sudden discovery of devoted singleness of purpose in one of the soft and foolish sex strikes them into as much distant awe and reverent worshipfulness as a manifestation of godhead in the flesh would do. So that George remained quite silent before Ella, with no inclination to thank her, but a strong impulse to fall on his knees.

After nearly a minute's silence, she said, in the same deep voice:

"Will you promise me to see her first?"

George looked at her in a sidelong, shamefaced way.

"I will promise anything in the world you like," he said huskily.

She smiled happily, and taking his hand, made him sit down beside her. The joy of

having procured his release had thrown her this evening into an exaltation of feeling which banished her usual awkwardness, and made her unreserved as only a shy person unusually moved can be.

"Remember," she said, "you have to save yourself up for a journey." And she turned upon him the motherly look which shines out in the tenderness of all the best women.

Ella was perfectly happy this evening, and had not an atom of jealousy that the thoughts of the man, in whose interest she could forget all scruples of prudery, were bent on another woman. She had done for him what his wife could not do; there was pride enough in that knowledge. There had been from the first so little selfishness in her love that by this time there was none —a not uncommon beauty of character in the plain of person who, expecting nothing, are more than content with a little. So she arranged all the details of the journey, and within a couple of hours she and her father and George were on their way back to England.

They did not reach London until the second morning after their departure from Toulon. George was disgusted and alarmed to find that he could scarcely stand; but he resisted the suggestion that he should take a day's rest, being afraid that if he once yielded to his bodily weakness, it would be a long time before he was able to get about again. So he left Ella and her father at the hotel where they put up, and drove to Mary Street to learn whether Rahas still lived there. This step he took with Ella's full knowledge; he should fulfil his promise, he told her, and keep his hands off the Oriental merchant until after he had found Nouna; but he must set about his search in his own way.

No. 36, Mary Street, looked the same as ever, except that, during the eleven months which had passed since George first drove up to the door, and dashing up the dingy stair-case came suddenly upon an *Arabian Nights'* nook in murky London, the lower windows had acquired a thicker coating of grime, and the board with the names

"Rahas and Fanah" had lost its freshness of new paint; the brass vases and lanterns, the Arabian gun, the inlaid table, the Indian figures, were still there, and the fact that the firm did not depend upon the chance custom of passers-by was more patent than ever.

George stumbled as he got out of the hansom, and felt, almost without seeing, for the bell. Fatigue, weakness, and the sleeplessness caused by intense excitement had preyed upon his body and stimulated his imagination, till on this, the first day of his return to his own country, he was like a man walking in his sleep, and saw faces and heard voices invisible and inaudible to all but him. Nouna, as he saw her first, sleeping like a fairy princess, amidst gorgeous surroundings; the strange doctor, whose warning against the girl's dangerous charms rang again in his ears; the dark-faced Rahas and his pretensions to occult powers—all these recollections chasing each other through his feverishly excited mind, dulled his faculties to the cold reality of present experience,

and when the door was opened by a woman whose face was unknown to him, he stood before her stupidly, without realising that it was he who had summoned her. When she asked him what he wanted, he pulled himself together, and asked if Rahas, the merchant, still lived there.

"Yes, he lives here, but he ain't here to-day; he's gone to Plymouth, and won't be home for a week or so. You can see the old gentleman if you like, or letters are sent to him."

Plymouth! The name sent an old suggestion into George's mind. He suddenly remembered that Miss Glass, the old servant of his family who had given Nouna shelter between her leaving Mary Street and her wedding-day, came from Plymouth, where her parents had kept a lodging-house. He had never doubted that he should find Nouna easily, and now he knew in a moment, without further reasoning, that she was at Plymouth, and that Rahas had gone down to see her there. So sure did he feel, that he did not even call at Miss Glass's house

in Filborough Road to make inquiries; but obtaining from the servant at No. 36 the final information that Rahas had not long started, George jumped hastily back into his hansom and drove to Paddington. He found he had just missed the 11.45 train, and there was not another till three o'clock; so he drove to Waterloo, and learning that there was a train at 2.30, he resolved to go by that in order to be on the road as soon as possible, although it arrived no earlier than the three o'clock express from Paddington. This left him time to go back to the Charing Cross Hotel to say good-bye to his friends.

Whether she was frightened by the thought of a possible collision between George in his weakness and the unprincipled Arabian, or whether she was stung by a feeling of jealousy that the time of her generous devotion to him was over, her work done, Ella grew ghastly pale on hearing of his intended journey, and tried to dissuade him from it. When she found him immovable, she endeavoured to induce her father to go with him; but both the men laughed this sugges-

tion to scorn, and the most she could obtain was permission for her and her father to see him off at the station.

George was absorbed, as he stood at the window of the compartment in which he was to travel, by a strong feeling of gratitude towards the young girl on the platform below him, in whose eyes he read a steady, unwavering friendship and affection, free from the advancing and receding tide of passion, without coquetry, without caprice, the noblest love a human creature can give, the one also which in either sex is sure never to have an adequate return. George looked down at her pale face reverently, and tried to find some words to express the overflowing feelings inspired by her goodness to him; but she would not hear. Stepping back from the carriage-door with a blush, she affected to interest herself in the rest of the passengers, when suddenly the flush died away from her face, and she came hastily back. Looking up at George with an expression of strong anxiety, she said in a whisper:

"George, for Heaven's sake be careful; I believe the man himself is in the next carriage!"

Lauriston, much startled, his face lighting up, tried to open the door: but she stopped him, saying: "Remember—your promise!"

The next moment the train had started, and George, overcome by the rush of feelings evoked by the thought that the man whom he hated was so near to him, sank down into his corner seat in the wet white heat which strong excitement causes to the bodily weak. He hoped that Rahas, if indeed it was he whom Ella had seen, had not caught sight of him; in that case George was sure that he had only to follow the wily Arabian to be taken straight to the house where Nouna was. The journey seemed endless; he fell from time to time into fits of stupor, in which he heard the tramp of the warder through the rattle of the train, and Nouna calling to him in hoarse, broken accents unlike her own, and a rasping voice shrieking out to the beat of the wheels: "Never to meet! Never to meet!" With a start he

would find that prison-walls and darkness had melted back into the cushioned carriage and the light of day, and remember in a vague, half-incredulous way that he was on his way to Nouna. Then the train would stop at a station, and he would look out eagerly, furtively, scanning the passengers who got out, searching for the man he wanted. At last, at Salisbury, where the train waited a quarter of an hour, his anxiety was set at rest. Wrapped in a long overcoat, and wearing a travelling-cap pulled low over his eyes, Rahas descended to the platform, walked two or three times up and down with his eyes on the ground as if in deep thought, and got in again without having given one glance at any of the other compartments. George had felt pretty safe from recognition, as he was much altered by illness and the loss of his moustache, and as, moreover, he was believed to be still a prisoner in France. Now he was altogether sure that Rahas was off his guard, and the knowledge gave him confidence. When, therefore, the Oriental merchant left the

train at a little station a few miles from Plymouth, George only allowed him time to get through the door before he jumped out after him, and turning up his coat-collar, as the coolness of the evening gave him an excuse for doing, gave up his ticket and followed.

Once out of the station, Rahas, without a glance behind him, struck straight across the fields by a narrow path that led to the distant light of what George supposed must be some little village. It was half-past eight; the showers of an April day had saturated the grass, and a thick damp mist lingered among the trees, most of which as yet had but a thin spring covering. The moon had not yet risen, and George had to hurry after Rahas, fearing in the obscurity to lose sight of him altogether. The numbness which had seized his tired faculties from time to time on the railway journey now again began to creep over him, so that the surprise he would at another time have felt, the questions he would have asked himself as to the merchant's leaving the train before he

came to Plymouth, now merged into a dull confusion of ideas, the most prominent of which was that Rahas was trying to escape him. As the path descended into a little valley dark with trees, and the figure before him, now indistinct against the dark background, disappeared over a stile into the shadows of the copse beyond, this fancy grew stronger, and feeling that his limbs were unsteady with ever-increasing fatigue, which made him hot and wet from head to foot, he broke into a run, reached the stile in his turn, got over it, and stumbling over some unseen obstacle, slipped on the soft, muddy earth, and fell to the ground. The next moment he felt himself seized as he lay on his face, bound with a stout cord that cut into his flesh in his struggles to free himself, and then dragged through brambles and wet grass into the little wood. This last was a slow operation, for George was a big man, and though no longer in the full vigour of his health, he was too heavy for his dead weight to be pulled along with ease. He lay quite still, without uttering a

sound, recognising, after a valiant but vain attempt to get free, that he was quite at the mercy of his assailant, he decided that entire passivity was his best chance of escaping such a quieting as would save him all further exertion. The first result of this was that Rahas, when he had continued his slow and tedious progress with his victim for what seemed a long time, stopped and peered into his face closely enough for George to make quite sure of his identity. To his surprise, the Oriental seemed quite relieved to find that he was not dead.

"Ah ha, you know me," he muttered, as he encountered the shining of living eyes in the gloom. "You are not hurt. That is all right. I do not want to hurt you, be sure of that. I bear you no ill-will."

"Thank you," said George quietly. "That is satisfactory as far as it goes; but I should like to know whether this is the manner in which you treat chance acquaintances, for example."

"No," answered Rahas, quite simply; "I am forced to this last means of keeping you

from the woman whom Heaven, as the planets declare, has given to me, and whom you have ruined by instilling into her your own soul, which is killing her fair body day by day. Do you understand? Her mother has given her to me, is only waiting for me to take her away to give her the dower you, in your proud folly, refused. I have waited long, I have tried many ways, to get what Allah intended for me. Nouna herself, weary of waiting, dying by inches, has at last given me permission to see her. Must I, at the last, with success in my very grasp after a year of waiting, see it wrung from me by the man whose touch has been fatal to this fair flower of the East? No. The will of Allah must be done. There are women enough in the world for you; there is only one for me. Nouna must come to my arms to-night; and for you, after to-night, I am at your disposal in any way you please."

There was a strange mixture of cupidity, fanaticism, and ferocious courage in his speech and manner which struck horror into George's heart, at the thought that his wife might

to-night have to come face to face, without a husband's protection, with this man. He uttered a loud shout and made a sudden effort to rise, which the Arabian frustrated with a movement as nimble as a hare's, accompanied by a short laugh.

"Keep still," he said more harshly, "and keep your shouting until I am out of earshot."

He made no threat in words, but his tone was so significant that George, to whom danger had restored his full faculties, resolved to save up his lungs. In a business-like manner Rahas then, with his knee on the young man's chest, assured himself that the cord which bound him was secure, and with a civil and dispassionate "good night," to which the Englishman was in no humour to respond, he turned and walked rapidly away; his steps scarcely sounded on the soft, damp earth, and only the crackle of dead branches and the rustle of living ones, growing fainter and fainter until the sounds faded quite away, told George that he was retreating rapidly.

Then came a time for the poor fellow when he prayed for death at last. With the rotting

leaves of the previous autumn forming a slimy pillow for his head, his body sinking slowly into the damp earth, while a rising wind moaned a low dirge among the surrounding hills and swept over the thinly-leaved branches above his head with a sepulchral "hush!" he felt all the horrors of the grave, all its loneliness, all its impotence, without the one blessing—peace, which we hope for there in spite of the clergy, who are ferocious as regards the next world to counterbalance their meekness in this. The deft Rahas had bound him sailor-fashion, beginning with the middle of the rope; and the knots were immovable as iron; he began to feel cramped and benumbed by the cold, the rising moisture amid the undergrowth of the wood, and the impeded circulation of his blood. Still his head remained hot as fire, his brain reeling in a mad dance of fantastic tortures, until at last frenzy came, and pictures of the past chased each other through his memory, but with a lurid light of horror upon them which distorted his fairest recollections, and turned them into ugly night-

mares. Then in turn the pictures faded and his senses began to grow dull, and strange cries to sound in his ears to which he tried to reply; but his voice would not come, and even as his lips moved in this effort, the last gleam of sense left him, and he fell into unconsciousness.

As upon the blackness of night the fair, pure dawn comes gradually, so George, from the stupor of a deadly lethargy, woke by slow degrees to sensations of warmth, and light, and joy; and feeling, before the sense of sight came back to him, a soft touch on his flesh that set him quivering, and a breath against his lips that exhaled the very perfume of love, he fancied in the first moments of a still feebly moving brain, that his prayer had been granted, that he was dead, and in heaven. Until suddenly there burst upon his ears a wild, joyous cry: "He is breathing! He has come back to me—back, thank God! thank God!"

And his heart leapt up, and an ember of the old fire warmed his veins. Opening his eyes, which were blinded and dazzled still,

he whispered huskily, "Nouna, my little wife!" and groped about with weak, trembling arms until she came to him, and lying down by his side, pressed her lips to his with warm, clinging kisses that carried a world of loyalty and love straight from her soul to his. Then, while he felt her soft mouth strained against his, he knew, all dazed and half benumbed as he still was, that a change had come upon her. It was not the restless butterfly kiss of a passionate caprice that she gave him, as in the old days when she would fly from his knee to the window and back again half a dozen times in five minutes; it was not the embrace of sincere but timid affection she had learnt to give him when they lived their struggling life in Paris; it was the seal of patient and faithful love satisfied at last. From that moment he had no questions to ask, no explanations to hear. What did it matter where he was, how he came there, how she came there? But Nouna, drawing her head back to look at him, saw his lips move, and she watched them and listened, holding her breath, to his weak whisper:

"Cold, darkness, pain, and the long windy nights—all over now!"

And he drew her closer to him, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER IX.

Next morning, when rest had restored him to a wider interest and curiosity, George learnt the missing details of his adventure, and the circumstances which had led to the journey of Rahas.

On finding that the pretext of her mother's illness, upon which she had been enticed to England, was a false one, Nouna, who now mentioned the once loved name with averted eyes, but without any other token of her suspicions, had felt guilty and uneasy about her husband ; and as she did not hear from him she slipped away one night to find the house of Miss Glass, of whose kindness to herself and fondness for George she retained a warm recollection. As she felt ill and had no money, it was easy to guess how strong

must have been the feelings which prompted her to leave her mother's house.

"If I could not be with you, I wanted to be with some one who knew you and was fond of you, and would help me to get back to you, George," she explained.

She had trusted to luck to find her way from Eaton Square to Kensington, and had been too much frightened to ask for direction. At last, however, when she was so tired and despondent that she had sat down on a door-step and begun to cry, a policeman had spoken to her, and on learning that she had no money, that she wanted to get to Filborough Road, that she was not sure of the number, but that she had friends there, he asked her whether she thought she could find the house if she were in the street, and suggested that she should take a cab, and ask her friends to pay for it. He had then hailed a hansom and put her into it, she had found the house without much difficulty, and Miss Glass had taken her in and nursed her carefully through a long illness which followed her rash adventure.

At this point of her story poor Nouna broke

down in tears, reminded of a disappointment which had cut her to the heart. "And—my baby—never came after all," she whispered in a broken voice, with her head hung down in pathetic shame; "and I thought it was a punishment because I came away without asking you, and I thought you were offended and would never forgive me, because when I wrote to Paris to tell you I was sorry and ill, and begging you to come, I got no answer. For I did not know you were in prison, Miss Glass would not let me know. It was not until weeks later, when—my mother found out where I was, and told me she had seen you, that I knew, and that I said I must come to you. So they let me go, with Sundran, to Paris; and first they said you were at Poissy, and I went there and asked to see you, and there they said perhaps you were at Toulon. So we went to Toulon, and I wrote to the governor, and he said I could see you in two months. I felt I could not live all that time, and I was wondering what I could do to see you, when the great storm came and damaged the harbour, and they said

some of the convicts would repair it. And my heart seemed to give a great bound, for I felt that my wish had come true like that. So I crept down to the harbour and slipped quietly along to the place where the stones were washed away, and waited until I saw you. When the second day you spoke to the warder-man and told him to send me away, I did not mind, for I knew by your face you were not angry; so next morning I wrote a message to you on the stone where you were working, and Sundran brought me back to England, for I was getting ill again, and she was afraid I should die there. And Miss Glass said I must go to the south where it was warm, and she sent me to 'Plymouth to her parents, and they are very kind and good to me."

"And did you let that wretch Rahas come and visit you?" asked George in a puzzled voice.

"I will tell you. I got a letter from him a few days ago, saying he was going to France, and if I pleased, he could take a letter from me to you, and let me see you, if I was

anxious, as he used to let me see—my mother. I had only to say yes, and he would come down to Plymouth. I hated him for deceiving me and bringing me to England, but he declared in his letter that was my mother's doing. And I was so hungry for some news of you that I wrote Yes, he might come. Then I could not keep still for impatience: he telegraphed to me to meet the train he came by, and I went to the station, and when I found he hadn't come by it, I described him to the guard, and he said a dark gentleman like that had left the train two stations before. There's a big boy at the house where I'm staying who does whatever I like, and I had made him come to the station because I was afraid of meeting Rahas alone. And I told him to take tickets for him and me, and we went back by the next train to the station where Rahas got out. The porter said two gentlemen had got out and gone across the fields; and I knew who the other one was, and I screamed, and told William my husband had come back. But he said it was a fancy. We walked across the wet fields in the dark,

and I was trembling so that I could scarcely stumble along, and William carried a lantern, and said I had better go back, for we were on a wild-goose chase. And when we came down to the wood, my foot slipped, and I fell on to the grass, and as he stooped to pick me up, William saw marks on the ground, as if something had been pulled along over it. He went a little way slowly until I heard him give a cry, and I ran to him, and—and we found you."

She could not say more, her voice was suffocated, her lips were shaking. But the whitewashed walls of the room in which he was lying, the hayrick he could see through the window, told George that it was to a farm-house he had been brought; and there they spent two days, until he was well enough to get up and go with Nouna back to her friends in Plymouth. Then began for them both in the pretty southern town a new and sweeter honeymoon, marred only for each by a secret fear for the other. In the first days of their re-union happiness gave their wasted frames a new vitality which made

each feel on the high road to health, but which made to each only the more evident the pale face and heavy breathing of the other.

They were sitting together in the sunlight one May afternoon, the window wide open, the breeze coming in straight from the sea, drinking in the joy of each other's presence as they were never tired of doing, when George passed his hand slowly down his wife's cheeks, and shivered.

"Are you cold?" she asked anxiously, nestling up to him and putting her little arms round him as if to protect him from the spring air.

"No," he said in a troubled voice, "I'm all right. But I'm afraid this place doesn't suit you, Nouna; you're getting so thin and white. You are paler than when I came back."

Nouna's face changed; after a moment's pause she sprang up with her old vivacity, and running to a looking-glass, gazed at her own reflection for some minutes, and then crept back to her husband's side with a bright light in her eyes. As he looked at her in-

quiringly, she drew up the sleeve of his coat as far as she could, very gently, and then baring her own arm also, laid it beside his, and glanced up into his face with an odd, tender, yearning expression which, after a moment's wonderment, opened his own dull eyes. For a few seconds neither spoke again. Then he snatched her into his arms and their eyes held each other's for some minutes in an ecstasy of relief and gratitude. George had loved his wife better than his career, better than his own happiness. Nouña, since the fall of her first idol—her mother—had turned all her devotion to the husband who had cherished her so tenderly. Both, therefore, dreaded life without the other a thousand times worse than death, and when it dawned upon them that they were not to be parted again, there was no further sorrow possible for them in this world.

"George," said Nouna at last, in a broken whisper, "if you had never met me you would have been much happier, for you would have married that good Ella, and have got on in the world and become a great man."

"Yes," said he at once.

"Well, aren't you sorry ?"

"No."

"Why ?"

It was not easy to explain. The sailor, sinking with his ship at twenty-five, does not in his last moments wish that he had been a grocer, though if he had he might have gone on contentedly selling tea and candles for half a century. George, struck down by misfortune in the prime of his youth, had tasted some of life's supremest joys, and the rolling years could give him no delight such as he had felt in running the whole gamut of an absorbing passion. He hesitated before he answered her.

"If I had not married you," he said at last, "you would never have been poor, you would have had as many lovely dresses and diamonds as you wanted, and nobody would ever have teased you to tell the truth, or to do anything you didn't want to do. And yet you are not sorry you married me. What's the reason ?"

She curled herself about him. "I don't

know," she said shyly. "You've made me feel things I didn't—feel—before."

"Well, Nouna, and you've done the same to me. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then so am I."

And in this state of placid but languid contentment these two shipwrecked creatures drifted on day by day, tired out by the buffets of fortune, and making no effort to escape from the black archer who seemed to have marked them down. The young come to this stage more easily than the middle-aged; when their strong passions and eager desires burn low, quenched suddenly by ill-health or desperate misfortune, all the busy wheels of the world seem to stand still with them, and they cry, when they feel that the pulse of life beats weakly: "This is the end!" While older sufferers, who have shaken Time by the hand, and know his ways, and have learnt to bear his penalties patiently, see only the daily work interrupted against their will, waiting to be taken up again when the storm is over.

There came to Plymouth, when Lauriston and his wife had been a week there together, a friend who saw something of this, and set her wits to work, after her custom, to put right what she saw was wrong. Ella Millard had brought her whole family to the town on the plea that a fortnight of the Devonshire air would improve her sisters' complexions, and arm them for the triumphs of the coming season. Having gained over her mother, from whom she inherited her own strong will, the rest yielded like lambs, and within a week of her resolution to come, they were all installed in a house at the upper end of Lockyer Street, near the Hoe. By Sir Henry and his two eldest daughters, who all enjoyed a serene animal health, and to whose lymphatic temperament trials of the nervous system were meaningless words, the wan faces and languid movements of the Lauristons were looked upon as altogether fatal signs. But the more discriminating Ella would not give up hope so easily. It seemed to her contrary to common sense, and to the lofty qualities she attributed to him, that the

man who had been her ideal should allow himself to be snuffed out of life so easily. Afraid to depend entirely upon her own judgment in such an important matter, she refrained from setting her scathing little tongue to jibe at him for the inertness of his mind, until she had found some person of authority to pronounce upon the health of his body. But George had never before in his life been in need of a doctor, and scouted the idea of seeing one now; while Nouna, on whose behalf Ella then pleaded, shrank sensitively from the ordeal of meeting a stranger, and only consented at last to see the physician whom George had called in to dress her arm on the memorable evening of his first visit to Mary Street. The very next day Dr. Bannerman arrived, and had an interview with both his patients. The entrance of the tall, slightly stooping figure, the sight of his dark, penetrating face, lean, lined, and impressive as that of a magician, raised a flush of excitement to Nouna's face, and brought back to her husband's mind a vivid recollection of the prophecy uttered by

the doctor on that May evening. If the sharp-eyed man of science knew all the circumstances that had chequered Lauriston's life since he disregarded that warning, he would indeed think that his sinister prophecy had been amply fulfilled.

The interview was a short one. The doctor affected to have no recollection of either of his patients until George followed him out of the room, and stood face to face with him on the landing.

"You remember me, doctor, I suppose," he said in a rather shamefaced way.

"Perfectly."

"The first time you met me you were kind enough to read me a sermon. You might read me one to more purpose now."

"More purpose! No. You can read your own sermon now, and I come to my proper function, that of curing the results of the acts my warning could not save you from."

"If you knew the whole story, doctor, you would hardly blame me."

"I don't blame you. How can I blame conduct which brings me a patient? If all

men were wise, we poor medicine-men might go sweep crossings."

"But, doctor, if I had been a wiser man I should have been a worse one."

"Not necessarily. And it shows no more virtue than wisdom to throw up the sponge when you are beaten by Fortune at the first round."

George reddened. "First and last round too, isn't it, doctor? Come, tell me honestly how long you give me to live."

Mr. Bannerman looked at him steadily.

"If you remain mooning about here, hovering along like a moth in the sunshine, brooding over things which are past and beyond remedy, I give you a year. If you buckle to, make yourself new interests in life, start on a new career, and get new air into your lungs and new thoughts into your brain, I give you any time from ten years to five-and-twenty."

George instinctively drew himself up into a more martial attitude.

"And my wife?" he asked with fresh interest and eagerness.

"I give her as long as she has a strong

heart and a brave arm to take care of her."

The young man turned his eyes away with a new light burning in them. At last he said with a tremor in his voice :

"You would not deceive us about this, of course, just to keep us lingering on a little longer ? "

"Not a bit of it. You are both suffering from severe shock to the nervous system, and because each of you thought you were going to lose the other, neither has had the energy or the desire to pull round. You besides, have a weak lung, and I tell you frankly you would not make her Majesty such a smart young officer again. But a man of your intelligence must have other resources."

George saw by the foregoing speech that very little of his history during the past year was unknown to the doctor. On the whole, this knowledge made him feel easier.

"I think I could write," said he reflectively. "I have already given myself some sort of training for it, and if only all my ideas did not seem to be locked up somewhere out of

my reach, I think I could express them at least intelligibly."

"Good," said Dr. Bannerman. "Then all we have to do is to find the key. I think I know a friend of yours whom we can consult about that. You shall hear the result of our conference very shortly. In the mean while, keep up your spirits and keep out of draughts, and English literature may yet thank your wife for taking you out of the army."

George shook his hand warmly, and the doctor left the house. Half-way down Lockyer Street he met Ella Millard, who was burning with impatience to know the result of the interview. As he came up she hastily dismissed a fair-haired young fellow of three or four and twenty, who trotted meekly off at once towards the Hoe. She was too deeply interested in what the doctor had to tell to utter more than the word "Well!" in a tremulous voice. She thought, however, by the expression of his face that his news could not be very bad.

"Well!" he repeated after her.

"*Is* it well?" said she impatiently.

The doctor smiled. "I think so."

Her face softened. "I thought it could not be the worst; it would have been too dreadful —and too foolish," she added sharply.

"That is just what I told him. Oh! I was very hard with him; I thought he wanted it. He has had an awful time of it lately, and the poor boy hardly knows even yet whether he is on his head or his heels. But it is quite time now that he made an effort to pull himself together. I gave him a good talking to, I can tell you."

Her look seemed to implore mercy, but she said nothing. He continued: "They ought to go away. He thinks he could write, and I should encourage him to try."

"And—his wife?" she asked, with a scarcely perceptible diminution of interest.

"There is nothing organically wrong with her at all. She will be herself again before him, and then help his recovery."

"*Help* him! Do you think so?" asked Ella doubtfully.

"Yes."

"I thought you told me, that when you

first saw her she produced on you a very different impression."

"So she did. But then—she was a very different woman."

Ella's mouth twitched rather scornfully. She thought that the weird prettiness of Nouna's little wasted face had bewitched even this middle-aged doctor.

"She is scarcely even yet an ideal companion for a man of intellect," she said with a slight touch of her worst, most priggish manner.

"H'm, I don't know," said the doctor. "Your man of intellect is generally a man of something else besides; and the housekeeper wife and the blue-stocking wife both frequently leave as much to be desired as—well, say, the flower wife, if once the flower learns to turn to the sun, as I think little Mrs. Lauriston has done."

"She is fond of him," agreed Ella rather grudgingly.

"And what more does he ask of her?"

"Nothing more now; but will it be always so?"

"Who can tell? But love on both sides is

a good matrimonial foundation. Have they any money ?"

"Enough to live upon as quietly as they are doing now."

"Ah ! but they want something more than that. He ought to move about, to travel, and she ought to be tempted back to interest in life with some of the pretty things she is so fond of. Haven't they any relations who could manage that ?"

Ella's face brightened with a little smile as she nodded assent. "I think the relations can be found," she said.

Apparently the doctor thought he had put the suggestion into good hands, for he looked at her very good-humouredly as he held out his hand and bade her good-bye.

"The gentleman who was dismissed for me will be wishing me all the nauseous draughts I ever prescribed," said he drily.

Ella grew superbly disdainful.

"Oh no," she cried with haughty emphasis. "He is only a silly young fellow who was a fellow-officer of Mr. Lauriston's, and who is so fond of him that he has come down here

on purpose to see him, although he puts off doing so from day to day for fear of waking in him recollections which might distress him."

The doctor was more than satisfied with this elaborate explanation.

"I dare say he manages to fill up his time agreeably enough—in this pleasant neighbourhood," said he gravely.

And he raised his hat and left her before she had time to utter another protest.

Now, quite unintentionally, Dr. Bannerman had done a very ill turn to a most harmless and kindly fellow-mortal. Clarence Massey, the humble companion whom he displaced at Ella's side, having been attracted to Ella by the devotion with which she had worked for his friend George Lauriston, had raised up an altar to her in his most affectionate and warm heart, on which, figuratively speaking, he burned incense all day long. Whenever and wherever she would let him, he followed like a dog, bearing her snappish fits with beautiful meekness, accepting any remarks she liked to throw to him, as precious pearls to be treasured in his memory; gentle, loyal, and

devoted always. Ella, who had begun by laughing at him, had been thawed by his distracted anxiety and misery over George Lauriston's misfortunes, until from tolerating she had begun to like him. And now, just as she was getting so amiable to him that he had begun to entertain hopes which he had the sense and modesty to think extravagant, this light suggestion on the part of a stranger chilled her into anger at the thought that any one should think her capable of a serious thought for so unintellectual a person as Clarence Massey.

She has promised, on Doctor Bannerman's approach, to rejoin Clarence on the Hoe; but it was with the step of an offended empress that the plain little girl met this well-provided young fellow, on whom a dozen mammas of marriageable daughters now fixed longing eyes.

"Well, what does he say?" asked Clarence, afraid from the expression of her face that the report was bad.

She told him briefly and coldly the substance of the doctor's opinion, but without any hint

of his last suggestion except the vague information that the pair had better go abroad. Then she walked briskly on in the direction of the Fort, and to Clarence's meek request for permission to accompany her, she gave the most brusque, most chilling answer that he could "do as he pleased." Of course he pleased to go, and when they got on to the narrow footpath which is only wide enough for one, he followed with tears in his eyes at the change in her, wondering what in the world had happened to make her so unkind to him. Meanwhile, however, an idea had come into her busy little head which helped the effect of the spring air in restoring her to good humour; so that when she stopped to look reflectively out to sea and caught sight of his disconsolate face, she smiled at him with mingled mercy and majesty and asked him why he looked so miserable.

"I'm not miserable now," said he, brightening up at once. "It was only that I was afraid you didn't want me.

Ella grew prim again.

"It is very kind of you to come," said she.

"Ella, don't say that. How can you say that, when you know very well how happy it makes me to be with you!"

"Happy! How absurd! I wish, Clarence, you wouldn't say such ridiculous things."

"But, Ella, why is it ridiculous? It's true, you know it's true. You know very well I would follow you to the end of the world if you'd let me, that I'd do anything you wanted me to, that I'm never so happy as when I'm with you. Well, why is it ridiculous to say what is true and what you know?"

"But I don't want to know it," said Ella sharply. "If I had thought you would ever talk to me in such a silly way I would never have let you come out with me. When I'm thinking about serious things, too!"

"Can't you see that this is serious to me?"

"It's only all the more ridiculous. You must either promise never to talk such nonsense to me again, or you must give up the walks."

"Very well, then, I must give up the walks," said Clarence resignedly, "for I can't make the promise."

And he walked away over the rough grass, and began to look out to sea on his own account. Ella, in spite of the "serious things" which had occupied her thoughts, was forced to turn her attention to this importunate and foolish person close at hand, and she did so with a much graver countenance than was her wont in matters relating to him. The fact was that this unexpected threat of withdrawing his despised attentions woke her suddenly to the fact that she should miss them. Ella discovered all at once that she was not so insensible as she had imagined to the ordinary feminine pleasure in the possession of a devoted slave. Even a Clarence who occasionally talked nonsense would be better than no Clarence at all. Some expression of these conclusions found its way to her face, for the crest-fallen swain was emboldened by her glance to draw near her again. She said no kind word however, and he was afraid that further pleading at the moment might be injudicious, so they stood very quietly side by side until Ella broke out vehemently:

"I wish I had twenty thousand pounds!"

The wish and the fiery manner in which it was uttered took Clarence so completely by surprise that instead of assuring her that she had only to say the word, and he would lay that sum at her feet, as perhaps she had expected of the impulsive little Irishman, he only said simply :

" What for ? "

" To throw into the sea," was her surprising answer.

He laughed, supposing that this was a faint sort of joke.

" I mean it," she added gravely. " I can get five thousand pounds of my fortune from papa, but I want twenty thousand more."

" But what a strange use for it ; you are not in earnest about that ! "

" Oh, yes, but I am."

" Well, if anybody were to offer you twenty thousand pounds, what would you say to—him ? "

" I should say, Thank you."

" Prettily ? "

Ella paused. He was bending his head to look into her eyes, and putting into that

word a great deal of impertinent meaning. Then she flashed up into his face a grand glance full of magnificent haughtiness.

"Of course, because I am not handsome, you think I ought to jump at you!"

"Oh, no, I don't. But whether you jump at me or away from me, you shall have the twenty thousand pounds."

"What, without knowing what I am going to do with it?"

"You said you wanted it to throw into the sea."

"Oh, yes, yes, so I do. But supposing I were to throw it to another man—a *merman*, for example?"

Clarence winced. "Whatever you do is right, Ella," he said, at last. "You can throw it to whoever or whatever you like."

"When can I have it?"

"I shall have to go up to town. I can raise it by next week."

Ella put her hand on his arm impulsively.

"You're a good fellow," she said, in a very sweet voice.

And Clarence, who had never had such a

mark of her favour before, felt all on fire, and wished he dared to hold her fingers where they had so unexpectedly placed themselves. But the overwhelming reverence he felt for this small girl taught him discretion, and you might have thought, by the stiffness with which he held himself under her touch, that a wasp had settled upon him, and that he was afraid to move for fear of provoking it to sting. But they walked back together to the Hoe in a very amicable manner, Clarence feeling that luck had helped him to make a splendid move, and Ella wondering whether by the acceptance of twenty thousand pounds from a man she could be considered in any way to have compromised herself.

CHAPTER X.

THREE weeks passed very quietly for George Lauriston and his wife without any markedly apparent result of the doctor's visit, except that George, trying to shake off the lethargy into which he had sunk since his imprisonment, had put himself into harness for a new battle with fortune by writing articles on the condition of the army for a local paper. He also took a journey to London to fulfil his long-promised revenge upon Rahas, and would probably have got himself into fresh trouble by using other than legal means of chastisement upon the Arabian, if that ingenious gentleman had not just got into a little difficulty with the excise officers over a large consignment of choice tobacco which was more than suspected of having

paid no duty, and some silver goods not up to standard, the hall-mark on which had been forged, which forced him to leave the land of his adoption for shores where genius is more respected.

Both George and Nouna for a long time refrained from mentioning her mother's name, and it was with some emotion that they both recognised her handwriting one day outside a letter directed to the husband, the postmark of which was Bath. George took it away to read, and Nouna made no remark, but when he came back to her, holding it open in his hand, he found that she was trembling with intense excitement. She took it from him with a passionately anxious glance, but gathered comfort from his gravely smiling face.

Nouna then read these words:

"My dear Mr. Lauriston,

"I am writing to make a request which I pray you will generously grant. I know there are differences between us which would make another meeting undesirable and perhaps painful to both, I would not suggest that we

should see each other again: but I implore you to let me see my daughter just once more. Six months ago I could have claimed this as a right, or I would have contrived it by a trick. But I have learnt to respect you, and I only ask. I am a different woman, I have grown old, I am changed, you would not mind her coming now—I swear it. Lord F. has been very generous, and I want nothing but just one more look at my daughter. Let her come and see the Condesa di Valdestillas, that is the name I bear here, and shall bear to the end of my life. A foreign title covers whatever of eccentricity is left in

"Yours very sincerely,

"LAKSHMI DI VALDESTILLAS."

Nouna was crying quietly as she finished. She clung to her husband's arm.

"Must I go?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes," said George promptly. "She has always loved you, Nouna; I will write to tell her you are coming."

"Oh, George, George," panted the little creature in the same low voice, "I feel so

wicked for not wanting to go! But all my heart has turned to you now, and I can't get the old feeling back."

He clasped his hands round her shoulders.

"But you will, Nouna, you will have just the feeling that is right when you see her all by herself, lonely, waiting for you whom she has always loved better than anything in the world."

All the sting had now gone out of his feelings towards the creature who, with all her odd mixture of coarseness and refinement, corruption and generosity, had lived to see the very virtues she had fostered in her child turn against her in the loneliness of her premature age. For George had learnt from Lord Florencecourt, who ran down to Plymouth two or three times to see him and Nouna, to whom he was beginning to be reconciled, that Chloris White had indeed retired from her old life, broken up and suddenly middle-aged, and had fixed her retreat in the pretty old city of Bath, where she lived safe from recognition in a colony of what the Colonel irreverently called "old tabbies," feeling neither

contrition for the past nor discontent with the present, and passing her time, with a serenity born of dulled faculties and worn-out energies, in petty charities and petty scandal.

Two days after the receipt of the letter George arrived with Nouna in Bath, left her at the door of her mother's residence, a small, well-kept house in a quiet street, and walked up and down outside until she should rejoin him. When she reappeared at the door she was very serious, and she beckoned him to come up the steps to her.

"Mamma wishes—to say—good-bye to you," she said in a tremulous voice.

Standing aside she let George see a bent figure, dressed in black, with greyish hair, and a wan dark face, who raised her great black, burning eyes, but not with the old boldness, to his face. He took his hat off, and held out his hand. The lean little dark fingers she put into his were shaking.

"Good-bye, Mr. Lauriston. I shall not see you again. It has made me happy to see you. Remember when you think of me that I had no chance—from the beginning. But I kept

my child pure, and so God sent you to her. I dare not bless you, but I thank you; if I were better I would pray for you. Good night. Good-bye."

The long evening shadows were creeping over the quiet streets, as George and his wife, walking slowly away, caught the final glimpse of a pale, drawn face, and great eyes like flaming fires, straining in the gloom for a last look at them. Nouna was very quiet, but she was much happier than she had been in coming.

"George," she said in a low voice, "I can think about her and love her now just as I used to do. When may I see her again? She would not tell me."

And George could not tell her either, though he gave her a ready assurance that she should come whenever she was summoned; for he had a shrewd suspicion that, in spite of Lord Florencecourt's belief that she was happy and contented, the restless spirit of the reputed Countess was untamed still, and chafed in secret under the new bonds of broken health, changed habits, and disap-

pointed ambition. Two days later this suspicion was confirmed, when he received the tidings, conveyed to him only, of the sudden end of the Condesa di Valdestillas, who had been found dead in her bed from an overdose of a sleeping-draught. But as she left a sealed letter for George with instructions to keep the news of her death from her daughter until Nouna was stronger, full of passionate thanks to him, and equally passionate regrets that she might not leave what she possessed to her child, he was not deceived, though he was the only person who ever knew the secret.

Poor Sundran, who was with her mistress to the last, implored George, who went at once to Bath on learning the tidings, to let her come back to her darling Missee Nouna. And as he was sure enough now of his influence over his wife no longer to dread that of the black woman, he promised that, at no distant time, she should return to her service.

On hearing that the "Condesa di Valdestillas" was dead, Lord Florencecourt, finally relieved from his fears, openly acknowledged Nouna as his daughter "by a former wife,"

as indeed poor Chloris, thinking over the position of affairs, on the eve of her first and last attempt at reparation, had foreseen that he would do, and settled a handsome allowance upon her. He came down to Plymouth in the last week of May to make this determination known to his son-in-law. He was accompanied by his niece Ella, who was in a state of strong but subdued excitement, but who gave no reason which her uncle could consider adequate for her entreaty that she might thus leave London for a few days in the height of the gaieties of the season.

On their arrival in Plymouth, Ella chose to remain alone at the hotel while the Colonel went to call upon the Lauristons. He thought this decision very extraordinary ; but on his return a light came to him ; for in the sitting-room, standing close by his niece's side, and bending over her to speak with a passionate earnestness which seemed to infect the usually self-contained girl, was Clarence Massey. They both started guiltily on Lord Florence-court's entrance, and Clarence shook with nervousness as he greeted him. Ella rushed

at her uncle, and asked about the health of the invalids with great vivacity and interest.

"What were you talking about when I came in?" asked the Colonel bluntly, when he had informed her that George and Nouna were neither better nor worse than they had been three weeks ago.

"We were talking about them—about the Lauristons," answered Ella.

And Clarence echoed her words. The Colonel looked from the one to the other incredulously. His niece seized both his hands impulsively, with a light-hearted laugh.

"We must tell you—it's a great secret, but it's coming out now, and you shall be the first to hear it," said she.

Then she made him sit down, and told him, rather breathlessly, a long story, to which Clarence played Chorus, and to which the Colonel listened with amazement, admiration, and something like consternation too.

"And who's to pay for it all?" he asked at last in bewilderment.

"Oh, we've arranged all that," said Ella airily.

Again Clarence echoed, "We've arranged all that."

And this astonishing unanimity naturally led Lord Florencecourt to a conclusion the expression of which would have filled Ella with the loftiest indignation. In the mean time, having been informed of the plot, he was pressed into the service of the conspirators, and that evening, when it had grown dark, they all three went to the house where the Lauristons were staying, and the Colonel entered, leaving the two young people to walk up and down outside in a state of breathless expectancy.

"Break it gently!" was Ella's last injunction as he left them.

Lord Florencecourt found his way up-stairs to his son-in-law's sitting-room in a state of great nervousness. He found George and Nouna, pale, thin, and languid as ever, the former sitting at the table, writing, while his tiny wife, curled up on the sofa with a large ball of wool, some long wooden pins, and a small, misshapen piece of work which was the result of many evenings' labour, flattered

herself that she was knitting. They were both surprised by this second visit from the Colonel, and by the fact that now he had come he seemed to have nothing to say.

"What are you doing?" he asked Nouna at last.

"I'm making George a comforter," she answered proudly. "I can't be idle while my husband's at work."

"Well, it keeps you quiet at any rate," he observed injudiciously, a glance at the comforter having convinced him that if ever it should be finished and worn it would belie its name. The Colonel fidgeted for a few moments, and the young people began to assume an attitude of expectancy, perceiving that something was to come of this unusual restlessness. "I suppose you wouldn't like to leave Plymouth—to go anywhere—to—India, for instance," he blurted out at last.

Nouna sprang up with a cry, a great light in her eyes. George's face flushed; he crossed the room and came to support his wife, who was tottering.

"Why does he say it? why does he say it?

It can't be true, oh, it can't be true!" sobbed she, burying her face in his breast.

"What does it mean, Colonel? Are you serious?" asked George in a hoarse voice.

He hated England just now, sore and beaten down as he still felt; but he had felt that to run away from it was cowardly, even if he had been able to afford it. This suggestion of change for himself and joy for Nouna therefore came upon his heart like a ray of bright light in the dead grey level of their languid lives.

"Make all your preparations to-night," said the Colonel, "for you will have to start to-morrow."

And, as if afraid of committing himself by any explanation, he left the room, and darted out of the house like a lad before they had time to stop him. In the street Ella and Clarence met him, full of excitement.

"Well?" said they at the same time, both quivering with excitement.

"It's all right. I told them—just enough and no more. I said it rather suddenly perhaps, but I was afraid they'd ask questions.

They're to be ready to start to-morrow, I said. You couldn't have managed better yourself, Ella. They were delighted, absolutely delighted."

The Colonel was right. To these two beings, whose hearts and minds were still scarcely as convalescent as their bodies after the trials of the preceding few months, the suggestion of this great change came as the grant of a new bright life to them. Nouna, in particular, was half crazy with delight, and seemed to recover in a moment all her lost vivacity, as she babbled of palms and sunshine, palaces with stately domes and graceful minarets, of elephants with rich trappings, birds with bright plumage, and dark depths of jungle where the tiger was known to lurk, and where every step was hedged with fascinating peril. That night she scarcely slept, and next morning, when Lord Florencecourt again made his appearance, accompanied this time by Ella, he was quite bewildered by the change in his daughter's looks. Ella herself, although very quiet, was almost as much excited, as she asked whether they were ready.

George, with dull masculine pertinacity, worried everybody by asking for details of the journey for which they had so hastily prepared; but at last perceiving, by the evasive answers he got, that some surprise was intended, he was in the end content to hold his tongue, and to wait patiently till the proper time should bring enlightenment. Arrangements had been made, they were told, for the transport of their luggage, and they had nothing to do but to start in the company of Ella and the Colonel. They set out on foot, which was one astonishing thing, and they were taken in the direction of the Hoe, which was another. It was a beautiful, bright May morning. From the seat by the camera obscura they all stood for a moment, looking down at the water, when suddenly Nouna burst forth into a cry of admiration at the sight of a beautiful yacht which was anchored half-way between the shore and Drake's Island.

"When did it come?" she cried with much interest. "It wasn't here yesterday. What a beautiful little thing!"

"Little thing!" cried Lord Florencecourt, with untimely impetuosity. "Why it's 150 tons; big enough to go round the world in!"

Then an awkward silence fell upon everybody, for, vulgarly speaking, the cat was out of the bag. And the conversation was kept up with difficulty until, descending the cliff, they all came to the little landing-pier, where a small boat was waiting with Clarence Massey standing up in it, waving his hat frantically and beaming with unspeakable enthusiasm. Neither George nor Nouna asked any questions now; and they all got into the little boat in a state of surprising silence, and were rowed straight out towards the beautiful yacht without anybody's remarking upon the strangeness of the circumstance. But as they drew near her, Nouna caught sight of the name, painted in bright gold letters on the stern—'Scheherazade.' She touched her husband's arm, and made him read it too. Before he could speak, they were close under the yacht, and Lord Florencecourt was leading the way on board. Nouna climbed up next like a cat, and the rest followed quickly.

Then Ella took the young wife by the hand, and, leaving the three men on the deck, led her on a tour of inspection. The yacht was a tiny floating palace, fitted up by the dainty taste of one woman to suit the luxurious fancy of another. The rooms were hung with rich tapestry, and with delicate China silks embroidered in gold and pale colours. The woodwork was painted with birds and flowers on a background of faint grey landscape. The bedroom was fitted up with satin-wood, and hung with rose-coloured silk ; while in order that George might have a corner better suited to masculine taste in in this dainty little craft, a very small room, dark with old oak and serviceable leather, had been appointed for him as a study. Every corner of the yacht held something beautiful and curious : skins of white bears, mounted in maroon velvet ; carvings in ivory, securely fixed on dark brackets that showed off their lacelike outlines ; treasures in bronze, in delicate porcelain, in exquisitely tinted glass from Salviati's, met the eyes at every turn. The whole furnishing and fitting

of the little vessel, down to the choice of silver-gilt teaspoons from Delhi and a lamp which was said to have been dug up at Pompeii, had clearly been a labour of love.

Nouna was overwhelmed; she walked along with her hand in Ella's scarcely uttering a sound, until at last she heard the words whispered in her ear: "This is a present for you—all for you, with my love. You are to make good use of it, and be very happy in it. No"—she stopped Nouna, who was breaking into tears, and incohorent, passionate thanks—"you may thank me when you and your husband both come sailing back strong and rosy and well."

Nouna smiled at her with glistening eyes as she put her little hands round the girl's shoulders.

"I can't thank you, I can scarcely try. You were born to be a good fairy to everybody. Kiss me, kiss me hard, and give me some of your own sweetness that I may be a better wife."

When they came on deck again they were both very quiet; and George, who had in

the mean time learnt that this fairy yacht was a present to his wife, and also that, in common with the fairy presents of tradition, for a whole year at least it would entail no expense upon its owner, could do nothing but shake Ella's hand warmly and murmur some incoherent words.

All the visitors on board now felt that their task was done. The luggage was on board, the steam was up, the hands were ready to hoist the anchors; and both George and Nouna showed signs of having suffered as much excitement as their still weak frames could bear. Lord Florencecourt, Ella, and Clarence took their leave quickly, descended from the yacht into the little boat, and rowed away in the sunshine, while the young husband and wife bade them good-bye.

"Where are we going to, George?" asked Nouna, when the little boat had reached the pier, and the passengers were landed.

"Just where you like. You are its mistress, you know."

She drew a long breath of pleasure.

"Tell the captain to go, as quickly as

possible, to some place—nearer than India—where there are palms and blue skies, and bright birds."

George obeyed, and, coming back, told her that they were going first to Malta. She was satisfied, considering that Valetta was a pretty name, and remembering she had heard the air was good for people with weak lungs.

"Yes, yes, let us go to Malta, George, and there you will get well," said she.

And she drew him towards a pretty little pavilion which had been erected on the deck. The hanging curtains were crimson and gold, and could be looped back to command a view of the sea in any direction.

"Why didn't Ella take me in there?" she said.

"Perhaps it contains some great treasure which she kept as a *bonne bouche* at the last," suggested he, smiling.

Already she had an inkling of the truth, and when she tore back the nearest curtain and found, kneeling on the ground on a leopard's skin among white silken cushions

which were to support her young mistress's head, the old servant Sundran trembling with joy, she gave way, and fell sobbing into the Indian woman's arms.

"Oh, George, George," she whispered passionately, springing up again to her husband's side, "Ella must have an angel from heaven hovering about her to whisper to her just what will make people happiest! Aren't you afraid of waking up and finding it isn't real?"

"No, Nounday," said he, tenderly, but with a thoughtful face; "I'd rather think that we have been in a dreary, feverish sleep, and that we are sent away to wake us up to life again!"

Ten minutes later the anchor was weighed, and they were steaming out towards the breakwater and the open sea.

Meanwhile Ella and Clarence had engaged a small, swift boat to row them across to the foot of Mount Edgecumbe Park; and climbing at a great pace up the steep road that skirts the walls, they got into the field below Maker Church to get a last glimpse of the

yacht. They were in time to see clearly against the blue of sea and sky the bright-hued pavilion with its curtains thrown back, and a group of scarcely distinguishable figures underneath.

"Yes—yes, I can see them—I can see them, George and Nouna and Sundran, too!" said Clarence excitedly.

Ella was shorter-sighted, stamped her foot with impatience because she could not make them out, and was fain to be content with watching the yacht until it was a mere speck. At last she could scarcely see it, for her eyes grew dim with rising tears. Clarence had now time to feel angrily jealous of her interest in the vessel.

"Poor little girl! Poor little Nouna!" she said at last. "How white and worn she looks still, so different from the brilliant little creature who came to us at Maple Lodge!"

"Perhaps she will die and leave him free," said Clarence rather bitterly.

But Ella's expression changed to one of sincerest anxiety.

"Oh, no, indeed I hope she won't! It would break his heart!" she said.

"I thought you considered her such an inappropriate wife for him?"

Ella reddened. She had thought so once, and she thought so no longer; but when and how her thoughts and feelings on the subject had changed, she hardly knew.

"It is very difficult to judge accurately in such matters. You see it's impossible to deny that they're passionately fond of each other, and you mustn't judge of the chances of a marriage by the way it came about, you know."

"No," said Clarence, interested, "marriage is an odd thing."

"Well," said Ella brusquely, "we must be getting back now."

"Won't you wait till the yacht's out of sight?"

Ella stopped and looked out to sea again, but she dug the end of her sunshade into the ground with nervous impatience.

"I'm so sorry it's all over; we've had such a jolly time getting it all ready, haven't we?" said he sentimentally.

"Oh, yes, well enough," she answered rather crossly, feeling herself an unpleasant void at the heart which she feared might lead to some foolish exhibition of weakness.

"It was an interest in life, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes, but there are plenty more left."

"For you, yes, because you're so good."

"Nonsense, I'm no better than you might be if you liked. It was your money that did most of it, remember. I assure you I don't forget the obligation."

"Now, Ella, don't be ridiculous. What do I care about the miserable money?"

"You'd care a great deal, if you were wise. A rich man who makes himself comparatively poor by the good things he does with his money is a fine fellow."

Clarence cleared his throat two or three times, and began to shake violently.

"Do you—do you think, Ella," he began at last huskily, "that you'd ever—care to—care to—make a fine fellow—of me?"

Ella turned sharply about and faced him.

"Can't you do it for yourself?" she asked loftily.

Clarence shook his head.

"Now you know I can't," he pleaded gently. Then, as she made no answer, he looked out to sea again, and saw that the *Scheherazade* was dwindling to a little grey point on the horizon. "Now I'll give you till the yacht is out of sight to make up your mind," said he.

Then they both looked at the vanishing speck. The moments passed, and neither spoke, though they could hear and almost feel the beating of each other's heart, and though each felt the silence to be desperately disconcerting.

"It's gone!" said he.

"No it isn't!" cried she.

Both were growing intensely excited. Ella opened her eyes wider and wider, and strained them to the utmost. Clarence tried to speak, but she stopped him by thrusting out her hand right in front of him, holding her breath. He looked down at it for a couple of seconds, and then ventured to take it very gently in his right hand, and to put his left on her shoulder. When he had remained in this

position for a few moments, she drew a long breath, and blinked her eyes violently.

"Don't cry," said Clarence soothingly, and he stooped and kissed her.

"I haven't answered you," she objected, raising her shoulder pettishly.

"Never mind that now. Let me comfort you, and you shall answer me by and by."

But Ella still looked persistently out to sea.

"The yacht's quite gone now," she said in a disconsolate voice, "and with it your twenty thousand pounds. I suppose, from a strictly business point of view, I owe you some compensation."

"Well, twenty thou. is twenty thou.," said Clarence, whose spirits were rising.

Ella raised her hand to her chin reflectively, a little beam of mischief coming into her eyes.

"On the whole," she said at last musingly, making no further objection to the encroachments of her companion's arm, "considering that I'm the ugly duckling of the family, perhaps I might have made a worse bargain! And to tell you the truth, Clarence," she

added presently in a gentler voice, with a touch of shyness, when he had made her seal the contract with a kiss for each thousand, "if you had gone your way and I had gone mine after the way you behaved over that yacht, I—I should have missed you awfully!"

The sun was growing hot over the land and over the sea, and a dim white haze seemed to soften the line between blue sky and blue ocean, as they stood still side by side under the tower of old Maker Church, savouring of the strange sweetness of having crowned an old romance and laid the foundation of a new one with the fitting up of the yacht *Scheherazade*.

Away over the quiet sea the little yacht steamed, the red-gold evening sunlight bathing her decks and cresting with jewels each tiny wave in her track. Under the silken canopy of the little pavilion George was still sitting, with Nouna curled up asleep by his side; while the freshening breeze, which rustled in the heavily-fringed curtains, blew straight in

his face, bringing health and hope with its eager kiss, and sweeping away like noxious vapours the dark memories of the bygone winter. Ambition was stirring again within him, and a craving for hard work, that his faults and follies in the past might be atoned for by worthy achievement in the future. Lost in thought, he had for a moment forgotten the present, when a slight movement of her right arm, which lay across his own, brought his sleeping wife again to his recollection. Bending down with a softened expression in his eyes, he looked long at the tiny face, the sweeping black eye-lashes, and the full red lips, the mutinous curves of which gave him a warning he scarcely needed that, when once the depression of weak health was past, it might still need all his love for her and all her love for him to keep the little wilful creature within the due bounds of dignified matronhood. The "semblance of a soul," as Rahas called it, had indeed peeped forth in her, and George Lauriston's belief that "the influence of an honest man's love was stronger than that of any mesmerist who

ever hid pins," had been amply justified; but Nouna was not, and never would be, the harmless domestic creature, absorbed in household duties, whom a husband can neglect or ignore with impunity. Such as she was, however, George was more than content that she should be, and the wavering young heart which had turned to him in the dark days he was determined by every loving and wise means to keep true to him in the brighter time.

And so, with good promise of a fair future, the sun went down in a golden haze on the calm sea, as the yacht still sped on for the warm lands of orange and palm.

THE END.

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